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MARCH
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Mega Defender!

Land Rover's 626bhp
Dakar wannabe driven

New 911
vs Aston & AMG

FIRST TEST: PORSCHE'S
RADICAL HYBRID GTS
BATTLES VANTAGE & GT

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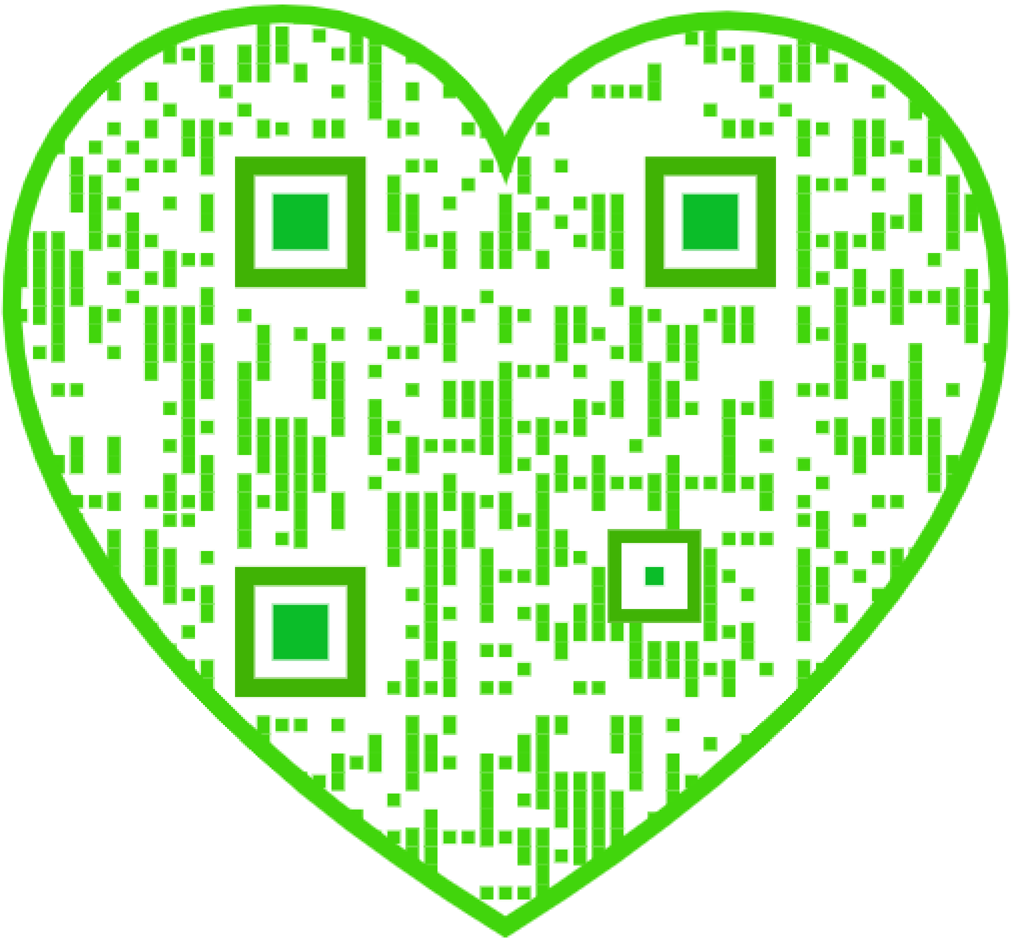
KM74 YN

Golf is great again!
Sensational new R
vs hot hatch rivals

Trump or Musk?
Our sobering 2025
power list is here

F1 2025: an epic?
Why history says it'll
be an all-time great



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Welcome

Finally, a chance for Porsche to get it wrong

Why does *CAR* keep coming back to the Porsche 911? We know that loads of readers share our fascination with it, but we're well aware there are others who'll be thinking 'Oh really – motoring journalist likes a 911?' and sighing at the predictability of it all.

I imagined other manufacturers rubbing their hands in gleeful anticipation when Porsche announced the icon would be going hybrid. Finally, a chance that Stuttgart might make a hash of it. 'Oooh, think of all the extra weight,' they would have crowed in their windowless corporate office, GT3-shaped dartboard on the wall in the breakout area.

But as you'll read from Ben Barry's 911 GTS Giant Test in this issue, the cynics and the rival manufacturers will have to grudgingly join in the applause. Zuffenhausen has approached the task of electrification with the single-minded focus and obstinacy that has made the 911 such an enduring success.

Part of that success has involved Porsche finding ever more ingenious gaps between the increasing number of 911 variants. It never ceases to amaze me how Porsche's GT department can extract margins from seemingly tiny improvements. Net result? It's unbelievably impressive on a circuit and is far closer to a racing car than a road car has any right to be. Which makes you wonder what role remains for the GT3 RS.

Andreas Preuninger, head of Porsche's GT line, tells me the RS's aero is about as extreme as is possible, so he's clear in his mind on the best route forward: 'It could handle more power.'

Preuninger is always good value, a man who speaks his mind but has a fierce loyalty to the brand he represents. Presumably there is a GT2 RS coming? Then comes that Preuninger twinkle, with an answer that reveals enough but not too much, while also giving the sense that he'd dearly love to tell you more because he's just so damned excited about it.

'We want our Nürburgring crown back. There is a plan for the GT2 RS and we want to show others, like the 1000bhp Corvette or similar, that we can match them.'

Not that everything is rosy in the GT world. Storm clouds might be gathering on the horizon as the world's emissions regs crimp Preuninger's style ever tighter: the latest car even has to put up with less torque than its predecessor. 'I can't tell you yet if this is as much as we can extract from the GT3: in late February, we will see a draft EU7 [the upcoming emissions regulations] and that will show us where we stand. The worst-case scenario is that it's unlikely we can keep our power level. And I don't want to go down on power.'

What about the GTS and its hybrid system? Does that offer a route out? He's interested in it but the weight penalty worries him, in a GT context. 'Our customers are keen on the motorsport technology, the light weight, and that the car is nimble. The GTS serves a different purpose, and weight is always a huge consideration for us.'

It leaves the 911 at an interesting crossroads. There have been plenty of bumps in the road in the past but the overall consistency and adaptability of Porsche's approach to its keystone is why it thrives.

Piers Ward
Deputy editor

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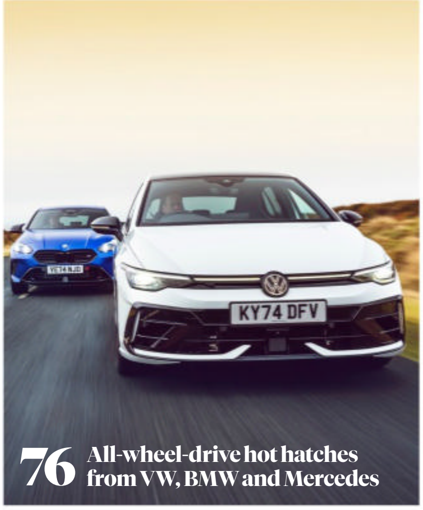

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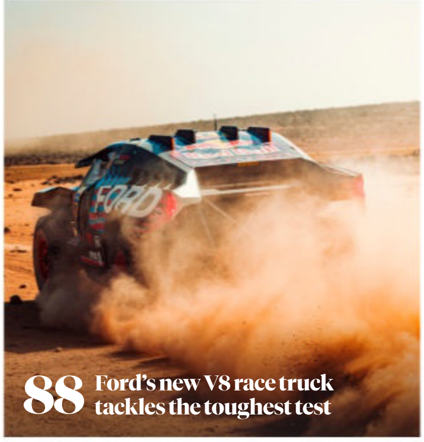

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Agenda

Prost won in ’86 despite not being in the best car

If wins are spread across four teams, one driver’s brilliance could make all the difference

MOTORSPORT

Why 2025 is shaping up to join the all-time greats

Damien Smith F1 writer

Vettel less than impressed by Webber in the wide-open 2010 season

▶ **Motorsport loves an anniversary** and there's one we can't escape this year. The Formula 1 world championship hits 75 in 2025, and you'll be hearing about it at every turn from now through the summer.

It would be fitting in such a landmark year if the F1 season turns out to be a cracker, and that's precisely what optimists are anticipating after a far better 2024 campaign than expected. Red Bull's dip in form, coinciding with revivals at McLaren, Ferrari and Mercedes, made F1 unmissable after two years of Max Verstappen domination. And in the final year of this current set of chassis and powertrain rules, there's every reason to be hopeful that all four of the top teams can again contend for race wins.

Who will be champion is impossible to call – which makes a change – ahead of the first wheel turning for pre-season testing in Bahrain on 26-28 February. Will Verstappen make it five on the bounce? Or can McLaren follow up on its first constructors' championship in 26 years with a drivers' crown for Lando Norris or Oscar Piastri? How about George Russell at Mercedes?

Then there's the sensational line-up of Charles Leclerc and his new 40-year-old team-mate, Lewis Hamilton, at Ferrari. How will they match up – and might it even be possible for Hamilton to get a record eighth title? It's a tantalising set-up.

As we prepare for what could – fingers crossed – prove to be a classic F1 season, *CAR* winds back through some of the world championship's relatively recent history for the landmark campaigns that might inspire and perhaps carry the odd echo of what is to come from Australia to Abu Dhabi between March and December.

In 1986, the best driver was not in the best car. Alain Prost cites that year's title as his favourite, largely because he knows by rights it wasn't his to win. The Williams-Hondas of Nigel Mansell and Nelson Piquet were faster than the Frenchman's McLaren-TAG in 1986. And yet at one of the most dramatic F1 finales, on the streets of Adelaide, it was Prost who crossed the line with both arms aloft as champion of the world.

Such a scenario is why Verstappen might well cherish his 2024 crown the most, because he was driving a Red Bull that was only third best across the year, behind McLaren and Ferrari. We can count on one hand the times a driver has won the championship without incontrovertibly the best car: Prost in 1986 is the prime example – or it was before Verstappen's most recent achievement.

Might such a feat be possible in 2025? Yes – especially if race wins are spread across the top four teams. One driver's brilliance could make all the difference.

In 1997, as now, Adrian Newey was on the move. It was one of those seasons made brilliant by a great rivalry, with melodrama a core ingredient too. Michael Schumacher's aim in his second season at Ferrari was to end its near 20-year drought of drivers' titles, but came up against the faster Williams-Renault of Jacques Villeneuve. The grungy son of late Ferrari legend Gilles was an F1 sophomore and probably should have made easier work of the title in Adrian Newey's last Williams. Instead, Schumacher pushed him all the way to the final round at Jerez – then attempted to shove him off when Villeneuve surprised him with a perfectly timed pounce at a right-hander.

Three years before then, Schumacher's professional foul against Damon Hill in Adelaide went unpunished. This time, it backfired as Schuey was left picking gravel. He was disqualified from the season for his crime, yet oddly kept his five race wins. As for Villeneuve, he'd never win another race. He moved to the new BAR team for 1998, benefitted from new rules.

During '97, Newey left Williams, frustrated at his lack of control at a team run by Frank Williams and Patrick Head. Three decades later, Newey has once again left a team, disgruntled at its management. This time, he pitches up at Aston Martin a full year before a big rule change. Fernando Alonso will be hoping F1's greatest designer will have the same impact he had on McLaren in 1998, when Mika Häkkinen defeated Schumacher. But Newey's magic can only be spun so far. Alonso might have to wait until next season to experience what such genius can bring – when he'll be turning 44.

The 2008 season was also, like 2025, the final year ▶

2021: Lewis and Max bumping at Silverstone

before new rules kicked in and – much as we anticipate now – a great season of McLaren vs Ferrari. Then, the British team was shrugging off the 'Spygate' scandal of 2007 and a $100m fine for holding in its possession Ferrari technical drawings. Hamilton becoming champion was the perfect response. But boy, did he leave it late.

Felipe Massa thought he had it for Ferrari when he won on home soil at Interlagos. But in mixed conditions at one of the great F1 circuits, unbelievable drama played out in his wake. Hamilton passed Timo Glock's Toyota at the final corner to claim the fifth place he needed to snatch the crown – and leave Massa and the whole of Brazil in tears. Now all these years later Hamilton is on the other side of the fence, with a mission to end the latest drought.

If unpredictability is key to a great season, 2010 provides a benchmark. Sebastian Vettel didn't lead the world championship all year – but he did when it counted the most. Vettel's victory from pole position at the Abu Dhabi finale punched the German and his Newey-inspired Red Bull team to its first world titles, as a poor Ferrari strategy call left a fuming Alonso staring at the back of Vitaly Petrov's Renault for 40 laps. He was powerless to stop what would have been his third title slipping away.

The 2010 season is a prime example of what we hope for 15 years later. Any one of five drivers could have become champion that year: Jenson Button, fresh from his surprise title with Brawn GP, gave Hamilton a shake at McLaren; Alonso won first time out after joining Ferrari, then pieced together a spirited campaign; and Mark Webber ruffled Vettel at Red Bull, especially when they collided in Turkey. Form swung from race to race, fortunes fluctuated and it was all gloriously unpredictable.

More of the same, please.

Moving forward to 2021, that was a season which combined greatness with some unsavoury elements. The dark controversy of the ending still haunts Hamilton – how an FIA race director fumbled F1's own rules to allow Verstappen an unplayable advantage in the season's final moments. But the lingering bad taste doesn't mean 2021 wasn't a classic season.

After years of Mercedes' hybrid-era domination, Red Bull clicked fully into gear and gave Verstappen the car he deserved. The Dutchman then took the fight to Hamilton in the no-compromise style that makes him so divisive. But the seven-time champion refused to be bullied. Neither would back down and inevitably sparks flew, most notably at Silverstone, where Verstappen was pitched into a high-speed impact at Copse corner.

We crave such rivalries, with just the right dose of tension and angst. Hamilton and Verstappen remain central to F1's potent mix, but Leclerc, Norris, Piastri and Russell – not to forget wily old Alonso – are battled-hardened too. A recipe for the best of F1.

Aston wants some of that old Newey magic

John Elkann's holding the fort while new CEO is found

SITS VAC

Fixing Stellantis is as easy as ABC: anyone but Carlos

Nick Gibbs Analyst

▶ **Whoever is picked to take the controls** at 14-brand behemoth Stellantis will float around for the first few weeks on the sheer gratitude of dealers, politicians, suppliers and unions that their name isn't Carlos Tavares.

The interim management has already taken steps to address their grievances. For example the fury of Italy's government, set aflame by the car maker's reduced local production of Fiats, Alfa Romeos and Maseratis, has been doused for now by Stellantis's December commitment to keep all its Italian plants open and add production of 'at least' two cars on the new STLA small platform.

Stellantis chairman John Elkann has also made overtones to the similarly concerned French government, while the company has sent peace delegations to dealer councils in both Europe and the US. The company's chief financial officer Doug Ostermann, meanwhile, has said Stellantis will start paying its suppliers faster, a big gripe under the leadership of Tavares.

In fact, all the immediate fires could be extinguished by the time the new face takes over. That means they must go straight to the task of trying to extract Tavares levels of profits from the same rag-bag of brands spread out across the globe, but with even less room to manoeuvre following all the costly brow-soothing.

'Too big and complex to succeed,' is how respected financial analyst Philippe Houchois describes Stellantis, putting it in the same bucket as other troubled automotive conglomerates like GM, Ford and the VW Group.

Tavares hustled his way to eye-widening double-digit profit margins, but flattering him was that extraordinary post-Covid era when production bottlenecks allowed companies to charge more money for fewer cars. Tavares believed that was the new normal, and Stellantis global sales fell to an average of six million in the last three years, compared to an average eight million in the final years of PSA and FCA, the merger of which created Stellantis.

The shrunken Stellantis posted profit margins of a size VW could only dream of. But restricting car sales hurt dealers, suppliers, factories and their workers. The new Tavares will have to decide whether to solve that problem in the time-honoured automotive industry fashion with lower prices and bigger discounts. The downside to that is reduced profit margins, which Houchois expects to halve to 6.1 per cent this year.

The newcomer must also decide what to do with all those brands. Does the company really need DS? Sales halved last year in the UK to just 1152. Will Maserati ever pull its weight? Is Chrysler still a relevant brand?

The new CEO also has to deal with the painful technology upgrade. Ostermann told analysts software problems were behind the delays to cheap EVs such as the Citroën e-C3. The 'software-defined car' is easy to imagine, but awfully difficult to pull off.

One solution is more link-ups like the one that saw Stellantis take over the global sales of tech-led Chinese brand Leapmotor. Extracting their electronic architecture like VW is doing with Rivian is one possibility.

Stellantis originally planned 25 electric models in the US by 2030, but will have to contend with the new reality under President Donald Trump, who regards EVs with deep disgust. Stellantis has already reportedly postponed the Chrysler Airflow electric SUV project due to be built on the STLA Large electrified platform.

The US is the region that ultimately unseated Tavares after it refused to pay higher prices for Jeeps and Rams, leading to overflowing dealer forecourts. Discounts and price cuts have repaired some of the damage, while long-awaited models like the new Jeep Cherokee hybrid will give the incoming boss an initial tailwind.

But the same problems Tavares fought to solve – such as production overcapacity, high distribution costs and the outsize role of suppliers – will continue to dog the newcomer. The chequebook appeasement phase won't last long. No matter who they are, the heady 'I'm not Tavares' fragrance will wear off very quickly.

EV RETHINK

Porsche buyers prefer engines. Who knew?

Georg Kacher European editor

▶ **After 30 golden years** Porsche suddenly finds itself at a busy crossroads littered with massive challenges.

At the heart of the problem is relatively poor sales for Porsche EVs, prompting a rethink of the strategy of switching to an all-electric line-up. Sales in China were down 30 per cent in 2024, the return on investment is veering away from the targeted 20 per cent, the Macan E and the facelifted Taycan are performing below target, with resale values plummeting, and the VW Group's electric-only SSP architecture is already three years late.

Porsche is not only struggling to convince its predominantly conservative fan base with electric products – it's are simultaneously facing fundamental productivity, cost, technology and infrastructure issues.

On 10 November CFO Lutz Meschke stated in an investors' call that Porsche would have to rethink its EV-centric strategy. Options would include new editions of existing combustion platforms, and making sure future electric models can accommodate combustion and hybrid powerplants.

He said: 'What is clear is that we are sticking with the combustion engine for much longer.'

Key to the rethink is the Macan Mk2, recently launched in electric-only guise. A combustion version – presumably sharing underpinnings with the new Audi Q5 – would most likely take three years to develop, meaning a long absence from the market of one of Porsche's biggest sellers. An announcement is expected in March.

As recently as October, Porsche was still planning a heavily EV-dominated future product line-up that included the Mission X supercar, revealed as a concept in 2023, the K1 seven-seat SUV, an electric Panamera, and electric as well as combustion Cayennes. How much of that plan remains is unclear, but we hear the 1500bhp Mission X is doomed and the K1 faces a long delay if not complete cancellation. The knock-on effects of the latter would be felt throughout the group, as the underlying SSP61 components set is earmarked for future Lamborghini and Bentley products.

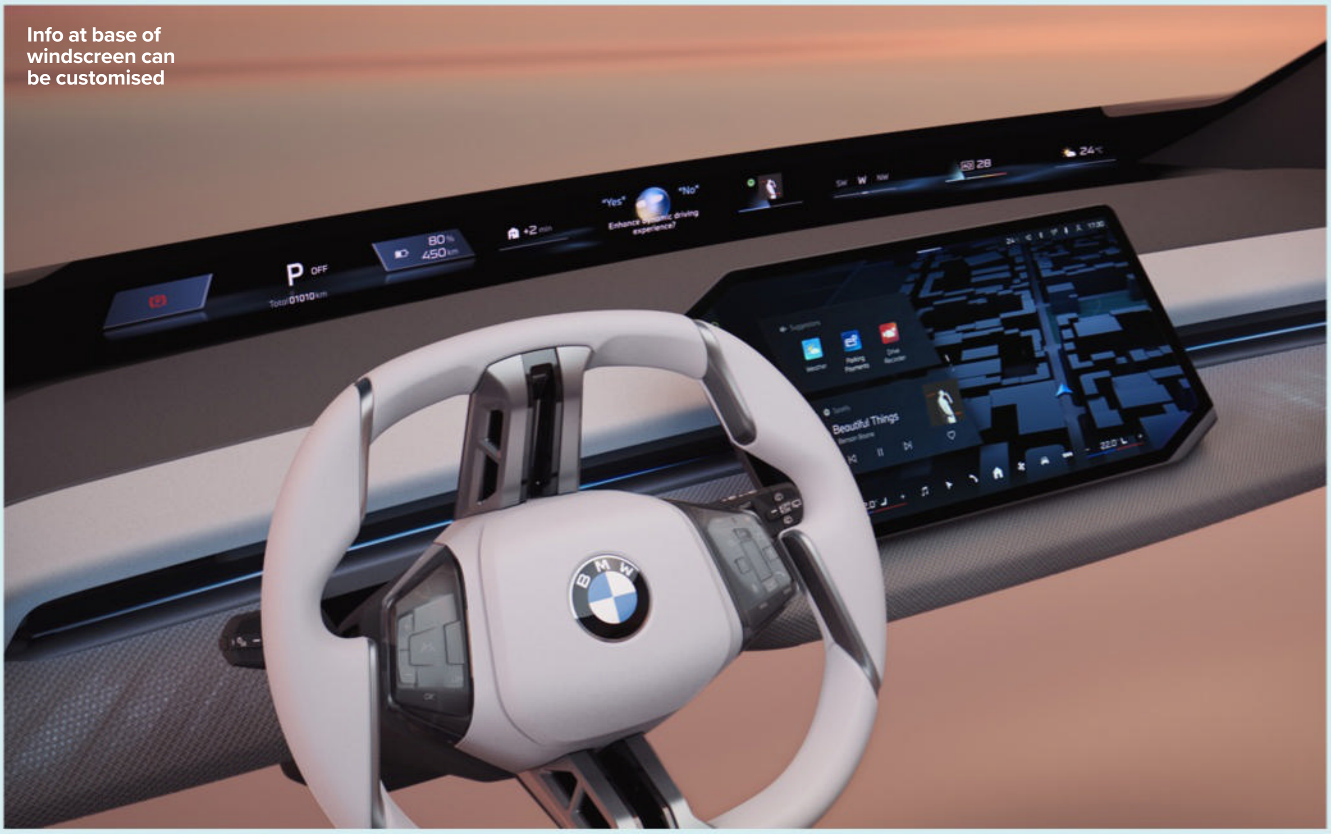
Backing EV so vigorously is now looking like a mistake. Instead of hedging his bets, BMW-style, Porsche CEO Oliver Blume drew hope from the initially very successful Taycan, and he waived the fallback plans for the best-selling petrol-fed Macan and the Boxster/Cayman.

Despite persistent software and battery issues, the electric Boxster and Cayman are finally heading for pre-production. That's the good news. The bad news concerns the ho-hum maximum charging power of 270kW, the corresponding extended charging times and the rumoured highly ambitious pricing.

Only five years ago, Porsche had envisioned a peak annual volume of 331,631 units for 2025. At the most recent investors' call, however, Meschke reckoned a mid-term maximum of 250,000 sales to be more realistic. Even this number won't come easy now that some projects might bite the dust while others will be subject to unforeseen lifecycle extensions which could harm their appeal.

Make that Mission Ex: low EV take-up is expected to dash hopes of electric supercar

PORSCHE
Mission X



Info at base of windscreen can be customised

TECHNOLOGY

RIP: BMW's iDrive controller

James Dennison Head of video

▶ **We've done it.** We've reached the point where car manufacturers are running out of space to put yet more information screens in a car's interior. The digital instruments, the central infotainment screen(s), the head-up display – all that real estate is spoken for. BMW, however, has a cunning workaround.

Welcome to the latest BMW Operating System X with Panoramic iDrive. The main event is the Panoramic Vision display, a reflection from a screen embedded in the dashboard, sitting right at the base of the windscreen. Replacing the traditional instrument display, it's formed of six customisable widgets.

The essential stuff (speed, gear, range) is right in front of you. Other widgets can take the form of weather forecasts, Spotify, air quality, incoming phone calls and, when in Sport mode, read-outs on torque delivery, power and various temperatures.

There's still the option of a conventional head-up display (sitting above Panoramic Vision), but that has less heavy lifting to do; on the demo we saw, it was only delivering route guidance.

The new infotainment is being launched with the introduction of BMW's redefining Neue Klasse cars, starting with the iX3 later in 2025, and will be used on all new BMWs from then on.

The four main components – central infotainment screen, multifunction steering wheel with haptic interface, head-up display and Panoramic iDrive – all run on BMW's OS X that has been developed in-house using Android code.

There's one glaring omission: physical controls, including the rotary iDrive controller, with us since 2001, although it's been gradually phased out on newer, smaller models. Acceptance was slow at first, but eventually its effectiveness was near-universally acknowledged.

BMW claims that, with the level of functionality on offer in the new system, traditional switches and dials would be too limiting, which is why OS X relies on a touch interface with the option to use voice activation via BMW's Intelligent Personal Assistant.

During our early preview, we were able to use a mock-up of the steering wheel and 'shy tech' haptic feedback panels, which display icons when they become available or relevant – for example answering the phone or scrolling through settings on the head-up display.

Glance to the side and the 17.9-inch central infotainment screen is closer to the wheel than before, while the angle it rests at (16° as a nod to the Hofmeister kink) will be mirrored depending on left- or right-hand drive. Here, you'll find crucial lighting and driver-assistance controls rather than in their usual position on the bulkhead or stalks. The layout of the central screen itself isn't hugely different to OS 9, but promises a more polished, intuitive design that works in tandem with the rest of the cabin.

Sounds promising, although we might have to eat our words later. For now, we'll have to embrace the widgets.

NEW CARS

Mazda's best EV isn't even a Mazda

Curtis Moldrich Web editor

Illuminated grille is toned down from the garish concept

Look closer and it's neither as plain nor as simple as it first seems

▶ **The Mazda MX-30 has not gone well.** The Japanese brand's first foray into electric cars may look the part inside and out, but its tiny 35.5kWh battery, giving a paltry 124-mile range, has gone down like a lithium-ion balloon.

The figures tell the story: since its 2022 launch, Mazda has sold just 6127 MX-30s in the UK. That's bad compared to the 28,429 Mazdas sold here overall in 2024, and a disaster compared to the 32,862 Model Ys Tesla sold in the UK last year alone. It's still bad compared to the 17,622 Q4 e-Trons shifted by Audi or even the 8927 VW I.D 4s. We'll stop there.

But now Mazda is back with the 6e, a svelte EV that fuses Mazda DNA with the tech, powertrain and range of a car you can feasibly live with. The 6e could be a soulful rival to the appliance-like VW ID. 7, or a slick alternative to the BMW i4 and the ever-popular Model 3. But the weird thing? It's not really a Mazda at all.

I'll explain. The 6e leans not on Mazda's own R&D expertise (which will still continue to develop EVs) but on Changan, a Chinese automotive giant not yet in Europe. The reasons for partnering were clear for Mazda, as explained by Uwe Mandal from its European technology research and technology team. 'The advanced technology, battery technology, also the raw materials, the expertise and the capacity are located in China,' Mandal says of the global EV picture. 'So for us it was a good partnership with Changan.'

The brand selected the EZ-6, first revealed at the Auto China show in Beijing, as the first car made in China to be shipped globally as a Mazda product – named 6e in Europe. 'It was good for Mazda 6 customers who will make the transformation into the battery-electric vehicle segment,' Mandal tells *CAR* of the decision-making process. 'It was a very good proposal to take this platform and then customise it for the European market.'

The EZ-6 and 6e platform is a world away from the MX-30's: there will be two powertrain choices: a big 68.8kWh battery and a bigger 80kWh. The smaller of the two battery configurations offers a range of 298 miles and is paired to a 255bhp/236lb ft electric motor driving the ▶

MAZDA
6e
MAZDA 6e

rear axle. That's good for 0-62mph in 7.6 seconds, and a top speed of 109mph. Charging from 10 to 80 per cent can take just 22 minutes.

The 80kWh car gets a range of 343 miles, and its 180kW (241bhp) electric motor delivers 236lb ft to the rear axle too. It's slightly slower to 62mph at 7.8 seconds but has the same top speed of 109mph.

So why the U-turn to a car with a more conventional approach to battery size and range? Mazda says it's not a change in direction, but merely a change in use case, though we're sceptical. 'The MX-30 was planned as a second car in the household, with more focus on the daily chores,' Mandal explains. 'The 6e has to be like a main car, a true family car that can go on a holiday or long trip. Mazda expects a lot of customers to switch over from the Mazda 6, so to meet their expectations the EV needs to offer a roughly comparable driving range.

The thinking behind the MX-30's battery size was that it would be environmentally friendly (less weight, fewer resources) and big enough for the average trip. That sounded great in the boardroom, but less so on the dealership floor. Mazda acknowledged its appeal was limited when it scrambled to follow the pure-BEV MX-30 with a range-extender (REX) version.

In contrast, the 6e won't be offered as a REX despite its Chinese EZ-6 sibling being available as one. 'We're stepping into full electrification with this vehicle,' Mandal reiterates. 'When you have such powertrain [like the REX] available, I would never say never – but it's not planned.'

A lot of customers will switch over from the Mazda 6, so the EV needs to offer a comparable range

Thanks to Mazda's epiphany, the 6e looks good on paper – but making it good in the flesh too was crucial: 'When you look at it now, you can see that it's really carries the Mazda DNA, the flavour that we usually bring to the market with our purely self-developed vehicles,' Mandal says of the car, shown to us for the first time at Mazda's R&D facility in Germany.

In the metal, the 6e hits the bullseye as well as so many of Mazda's other recent products; it's a well-balanced fusion of intricate details, billowing curves and scalloped recesses, on the elegant canvas of an executive-looking hatchback body.

Measuring 4921mm long, 2156mm wide and 1461mm high, the 6e is bigger than the 6 in every direction. It's classy but sporty, with a low, sharp front end and a high, spacious rear. A spoiler at the rear rises and lowers depending on the speed you're going.

Inside there's a good amount of both head- and legroom – even for someone over 6ft – and there's a 330-litre boot, which extends to 1074 litres with the seats down. It's

a hatchback for passenger space and storage reasons.

The new car gets a simple typeface on the rear rather than a badge because Mazda admits its current logo simply isn't recognised widely enough.

The EZ-6's garish fully illuminated grille has been purposely lost in translation: only the grille-surround lights up on the 6e. It animates when the car is charging. 'Chinese customers are more used to expressive signalling and blinking lights,' Mandal explains, 'but here we want to embody a different design language, one more in line with our Japanese aesthetic approach.'

Other tweaks include sharpened dynamics over the Chinese car. 'The key is that the vehicle performs as a true Mazda in the European market, to meet European drive expectations,' he continues. 'For a nimble drive, for handling, for that typical Mazda feeling. I think in other regions, it's not as much the focus of customers.'

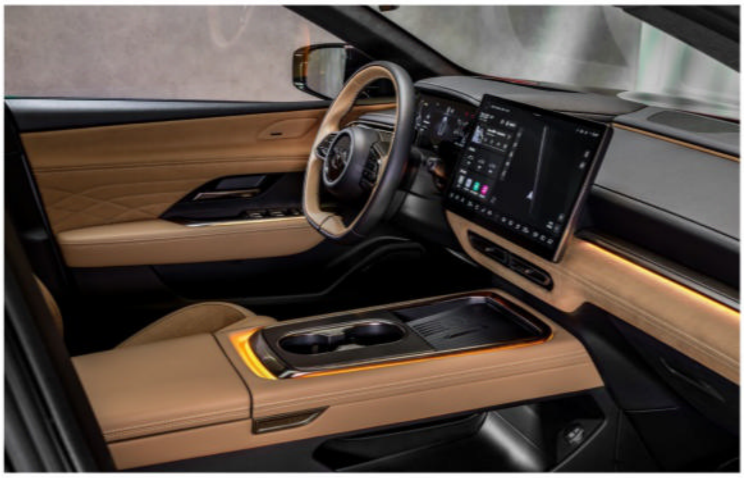
Inside, the 6e steps away from Mazda's (very welcome) focus on keeping phsyical switchgear. Instead, almost all of the car's controls are placed on a huge 14.6-inch screen, with 10.2-inch digital instruments and a head-up display.

Hand gestures designed to control the infotainment are new for Mazda, and our show car features a Sony-badged 14-speaker audio system. You'll find beige or black artificial leather in the standard Takumi package, though that improves to gorgeous tan nappa leather and suede in the Takumi Plus. The latter spec has an electric sunshade instead of a tinted panoramic sunroof.

Saloon-shape body is a hatch: classic interior is Mazda's most advanced yet

So when's it coming out? The 6e is already in production and will arrive in dealer showrooms in summer this year. The UK will have to wait for a few months for the right-hand drive version, which arrives in 2026.

Mazda has found itself a powertrain with the figures to compete with the EV market leaders which is elegantly wrapped in a body that shows Mazda styling at its best. It'll be targeting that big chunk of EV buyers that buy things like the Model 3. At the very least, we'd say it stands a better chance than the MX-30 ever could.



That's one very carefully chosen handkerchief

SALES TRENDS

When losing sales is really a win

Colin Overland Production editor

▶ **In the topsy-turvy world** of the ultra-rich, Rolls-Royce selling fewer cars in 2024 than in the previous two years is a kind of victory. How come? Because total sales may have dropped by five per cent, but there's been a more than compensatory increase in the level of customisation applied to the cars.

Rolls doesn't talk numbers – it's 'figure shy' in the words of chief executive Chris Brownridge – but that personalisation, ensuring no two cars are the same, is a handsome earner. And it's going to become an even bigger part of Rolls revenues, now a £300m expansion project is underway. (Building the factory, opened in 2003, cost £65m.)

That will add an environmentally low-impact new building to the factory at Goodwood, partly for logistics purposes – the glamorous world of loading bays – and partly to ease the transition to an electric line-up over the rest of the decade. But it's mostly to make room for more customisation by the Bespoke team, and one-offs from the even more exclusive Coachbuild team.

When the expansion is complete, the aim isn't to increase the number of cars made, but to do more individualisation. Monogramming the head restraints, sewing intricate LED patterns in the roof lining, buffing the wood on the dash to an even greater degree and finishing the exterior in a unique shade – all of this takes extra time, and at the moment the patience of some of those ultra-rich customers is being stretched. The new paint shop and extra space for the highly skilled interior finishers will allow those waiting times to come down a little.

'One of the things I found most remarkable when I joined Rolls-Royce 12 months ago: the talent and skills that our people have. Bespoke involves paintings and carvings and marquetry,' says Brownridge.

'We have more than 100 apprentices. Since 2009, 70 per cent of the apprentices who started with us are still working at Rolls-Royce. We will also bring people into the organisation who come from all sorts of walks of life. It could be that they're a tattoo artist or a cabinet maker.'

Brownridge is keen to stress that all this exquisite finishing shouldn't be a distraction from the dynamic qualities of the cars: 'every Rolls-Royce should be a remarkable motor car. We're not wavering from that.'

When Rolls-Royce, newly under BMW ownership, moved into the new factory on the Goodwood estate, it employed 300 people and produced one car a week. Now it has a workforce of 2500 and produces 20-26 cars a day.

Of the 5712 cars sold last year, the Cullinan SUV was still the biggest seller, but the electric Spectre is catching up fast – it was ahead in Europe. Later this year, a second Rolls EV will be unveiled.

Brownridge is revealing nothing about that car, but says Rolls is sticking to its commitment to go all electric, encouraged by the success of the Spectre. There will not be any hybrid phase between the current V12s and the full electric range. 'What we won't do is compromise,' he says. 'Today, Spectre delivers a remarkable driving experience, as do our V12s. We won't offer anything in between.'

Take that, hybrids. And what about self-driving? Not yet, but he's not ruling it out for the future.

'Our clients love the fact that their Rolls-Royces have lots of technology with them, but they're not overfaced by it. As technology becomes available, you see different technology with the cars. The offer we have meets their requirements for today, but we're always looking at future innovations.'

Brownridge may be less flamboyant than his predecessor as CEO, Torsten Müller-Ötvös, but is clearly every bit as determined to continue the brand's success, measured not only in sales and revenue, but also in the relative youthfulness of its buyers and their geographical spread. Sales in Thailand, Japan and the UAE are all growing, as is the network of 'private offices' – swanky spaces in distant markets, from Korea to Dubai, where customers can spec their Rolls with members of the design team, without having to make the trek to West Sussex.

Battery EV

Plug-in hybrid EV

HANKOOK
driving emotion

iON FlexClimate
iON FlexClimate SUV

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3PMSF

All Season Performance

The iON Flexclimate (and SUV) is engineered and designed to bear the high torque power of Electric Vehicles and to provide accurate handling to keep you safe in all road hazards in all season.

i Extreme **Lightness** & i Super **Mileage**

Energy Efficient & Enhanced Mileage

Hankook understands the concerns of loosing energy while driving Electric Vehicles in all weather. By reducing the rolling resistance, the battery lasts longer to drive a longer distance. A few miles can be crucial during an emergency.

i **Sound** Absorber

Noise Free

Electric motors are almost soundless which eventually causes the driver to hear more noise from tyres. With the i Sound Absorber, the iON Flexclimate (and SUV) offers a quiet and pleasant ride in all speed ranges.

Their heads may be saying yes but their hearts are unconvinced

INDUSTRY

The last thing Honda needs right now? Nissan

Angus MacKenzie Global industry commentator

▶ **The proposed merger with Nissan** will hurt Honda. Managing an angry, ailing Nissan is a distraction it can't afford at a time when it needs to prioritise countering the threat from China's increasingly competent and accomplished car makers.

The problem is cultural. Japan's automotive industry remains siloed and insular; few executives move between companies. And Japanese car makers have a poor understanding of brands – the relative failure of Honda's Acura and Nissan's Infiniti luxury divisions are a case in point.

What's more, Honda has long been one of Japan's most singular car makers; echoes of founder Soichiro Honda, that stubborn and iconoclastic engineer, still resonate through the company's culture. Honda can only view Nissan through the prism of its own experience. And it

> **Instead of talk of synergies, the deal has the gritted-teeth vibe of a shotgun wedding**

will struggle to understand what it sees.

The signals from the top aren't encouraging. 'That's a difficult one,' Honda CEO Toshihiro Mibe confessed when asked in a press conference why Nissan would make a good business partner. The announcement that Honda and Nissan are discussing merging their operations into a single joint holding company by August 2026 should have been accompanied by lots of frothy talk of synergies and efficiencies and improved profitability. After all, a merged Honda and Nissan (including Mitsubishi, in which Nissan has a controlling stake) would be the third largest car maker in the world after Toyota and VW.

Instead, the deal has the gritted-teeth vibe of a shotgun wedding. And there's no doubt about who's holding the shotgun: Japan's powerful Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), which doesn't want ailing Nissan to fall into the wrong hands. Be in no doubt: Nissan's in big trouble. Operating profit collapsed 90 per cent in the six months to the end of September last year.

Honda has problems too. It's frantically playing catch-up in electric vehicles, its market share in China is shrinking, and the brand has a low profile on European roads.

On paper, though, there are potential synergies. One of Japan's oldest car makers, Nissan was long regarded as the best in terms of its manufacturing capability. It was also the most expansionist, building its first factory outside of Japan in 1966, in Mexico. As a result, Nissan has a bigger global manufacturing footprint that could in theory help Honda in markets such as Europe and Africa.

It has a mixed record in terms of product, however: the landmark Nissans, cars such as the Z cars and the Skyline GT-Rs, were conceived by maverick executives such as Yutaka Katayama, the first president of Nissan Motor Corporation USA, and Shin'ichiro Sakurai, the talented engineer Nissan acquired when it was asked to take over the failing Prince Motor Company in 1966.

Mainstream Nissans have tended to be worthy but dull: tough and durable vehicles with little charisma. And that's where Honda could help. If Nissan epitomises Japan's automotive establishment, Honda has always been something of an outsider. While wealthy Nissan was planning to build an imposing new headquarters building on Tokyo's prestigious Ginza, motorcycle-making Honda was racing to beat a 1961 decree from METI's predecessor that any company not building cars by 1963 would not be permitted to enter the sector.

The result was the S500, a bijou sports car whose jewel-like 531cc four-cylinder engine featured dual overhead camshafts, four carburettors and a crankshaft that spun on needle roller bearings, allowing it to zing to a dizzying 9500rpm.

The 500 set the template for Honda to become regarded as the most engineering-led of Japan's car makers, a reputation cemented by innovations such as the CVCC combustion system which allowed the 1974 Honda Civic to meet US exhaust emissions standards without a catalytic converter, and the VTEC variable valve timing system. But it also set in place a curious myopia.

Honda builds more internal combustion engines – about 20 million a year, for cars, motorcycles, boats and lawnmowers, among others – than any other company on the planet. Electric motors are simply not part of its engineering DNA. And though Nissan inexplicably managed to squander the first-mover advantage offered by the Leaf, which went into production two years before Tesla's Model S, it could help Honda with EV development and manufacturing.

Honda, which is currently worth more than four times as much as Nissan and generates twice the revenue, will almost certainly control the new holding company.

The humiliation will run deep at Nissan, a company that long regarded itself as Japan's elite car maker. However, playing second fiddle to Honda won't be as humiliating as having been rescued in 1999 by Renault, says a former European Nissan executive who spent years working in Japan. 'They never got over the fact they were bailed out by westerners,' he says, 'and that a western management team did a better job of running Nissan than they could themselves.'

That METI would prefer Nissan to be a diminished Japanese-run company rather than a potentially vibrant one owned by ambitious and well-resourced foreigners speaks volumes about the xenophobia that still simmers under the surface of Japan Inc. And Nissan would be diminished: as it and Honda produce pretty much the same sorts of products for largely the same markets, efficiency gains will have to come through cost reduction and the elimination of plants and duplicated development work.

Moreover, though a merger with Honda may help both companies more efficiently invest in new products and new technologies, it won't necessarily solve Nissan's existential crisis. 'I hate to be critical of current management,' says a former Nissan insider, 'but they've done nothing to define what the hell Nissan is and why it deserves to exist.'

Honda is unlikely to be able to figure that out, either.

Honda at least has a decent idea of what it stands for

NISSAN
日産東京
HONDA

INDUSTRY

Polestar banks on normal

Tim Pollard Group digital editorial director

▶ **Michael Lohscheller's inbox** was heaving when he joined Polestar as chief executive officer on 1 October. He took the reins from the company's founder and design architect, Thomas Ingenlath, and has set about restoring the sheen to the Volvo spin-off that hasn't had the best couple of years but is still Europe's best Tesla alternative.

Problems were mounting after the honeymoon launch period, as evidenced by a share price that had remained stubbornly low since listing on the Nasdaq in June 2022. It's hard not to perceive Lohscheller's appointment as a sensible decision to bring financial rigour and business acumen to sharpen Polestar's strategy. The markets seemingly approve, with the share price doubling in the week of his appointment.

Where Ingenlath brought creative vision, impeccable

Lohscheller brings a whole new world of sensible

design DNA and consistent branding, Lohscheller arrives clutching a gold-plated CV polished over 33 years in prominent financial roles at Mitsubishi, Volkswagen and Opel, where he presided over record operating profits. He is tasked with making the business sustainable, and has pledged to break even for the first time in 2025.

We meet the new incumbent in London on a brisk, bright January morning. A dedicated runner who recently tackled marathons in Sweden and Berlin, the towering CEO has just been jogging along the banks of the Thames and is fizzing with the energy of a new joiner. He's already shaken up the product portfolio, fast-tracking the Polestar 7 – a compact electric crossover – at the expense of the niche 6 roadster, whose debut has been pushed back to later this decade.

'Compact SUVs are where it is at, especially in Europe,' he tells *CAR*. 'It's the segment to go for… Size-wise, it's between Volvo EX30 and EX40. This is where the heart of the market is. Very few real premium companies are there; there's a lot of mass-market [rivals]. But we feel this is perfect: it's a big profit pool and big volume pool.'

Volume is one thing Polestar must address urgently. Global sales fell 15 per cent last year to a whisker under 45,000 cars, but Lohscheller is confident the freshly launched 3 and 4 will provide the impetus, after years of relying just on the Polestar 2. That hatchback-on-stilts has done a lot of heavy lifting as the sole model this decade; 170,000 have been sold since 2020.

What the smaller, cheaper 7 will introduce is a lower price point and higher sales volumes. Today the Polestar 2 starts at £43k, while the 3 kicks off at £67k and the 4 from £58k. The new management team hopes to combine decent profit margins from the bigger cars with greater numbers from the smaller models, supported by aggressive growth of the dealership network, with eight more Polestar Spaces planned for the UK by next year.

Dealers? Yes indeed. It's quite a major U-turn from the agency model and digital sales of yore. 'There's nothing wrong with traditional salespeople: people who know how to sell a car, who explain it to you, and if they can also give you 10 per cent positive extra on top, there's nothing wrong with that.'

It's a neat encapsulation of the competing pressures Polestar is facing: to act like a clean-sheet start-up and embrace the fully digital future or to fall back on received wisdom and get involved in the grubby, cut-throat process of flogging cars? Lohscheller plots a pragmatic path between the two.

It's early days, but the injection of fresh metal is already working. 'The order bank in the fourth quarter was double that of the prior year. We see strong improvements,' vows the CEO. Don't expect the sales charts to be altered much by the arrival later this year of the Polestar 5, a six-figure vanity project that has been developed by the company's R&D division in Coventry. Engineers there have developed a bonded aluminium platform to allow for low-volume production of cars like the 5 and the delayed 6 convertible.

2 has been joined by 3 and 4, with 5 (here in camo) to follow

Six models based on four different platforms with only modest sales aspirations sounds like a recipe for financial disaster, and addressing this is the focus of Lohscheller's turnaround plan. He admits a company of Polestar's scale must be more disciplined, and reveals that every car developed after the 7 will share that car's new platform.

'I want more volume. Today every car has a different platform and, although there are good reasons for why we do that, it creates complexity and cost. So now we bring the Polestar 7 on a new group architecture. All cars that come afterwards we put on this exact platform. Unfortunately, it will take time, but we now have a consistent platform strategy.'

Lohscheller also commits to replacing the 2 with another 2, scotching rumours the 7 would fill this role. (He's planning to stick with the naming strategy that means the newest model gets the highest number, which is why, contrary to the habits of the rest of the car industry, the 7 is the smallest, cheapest car in the range but wears the highest number.)

With global demand for EVs flakier than a melting chocolate finger in your Mr Whippy, and with new US president Donald Trump unravelling American targets for electrification within hours of his appointment, would the boss consider the unthinkable? Would Polestar ever change tack and launch a car with a combustion engine again? 'No way. Polestar is extremely well positioned as battery-electric only… We hold course. Polestar is doing the right thing.'

Six models on four platforms with modest sales aspirations sounds like a recipe for financial disaster

NEW CARS

Which is the odd one out?

Jake Groves Deputy News Editor

The small electric tech-fest

BYD's smallest crossover yet, the Atto 2, has all the brand's hallmarks but in a dinky package. Clean, if a little boring, design? Yup. Silly rotating screen inside? Definitely. Durable battery technology? Naturally. For the UK, the Atto 2 features a 45.1kWh battery pack and 174bhp e-motor, claiming a relatively piddly 194-mile range for now before a larger battery pack launches later in 2025. BYD claims 'padded surfaces in all key areas' inside, which seems like code for something, and the brand promises plenty of space for stuff and things. Unlike other BYDs, this could be a proper cheapie, too.

The medium electric tech-fest

Light bars are all the rage. Makes sense, then, that Tesla's latest Model Y has two of them – front and rear. There is more to the 'Juniper' update than that, though, as the world's favourite EV benefits from a heavy refresh. New cast parts make it simpler to build and structurally tougher, sleeker bodywork improves aero, and interior details like softer materials and screen upgrades add extra functionality. China-spec performance figures claim a maximum of 447 miles on a charge and a 4.3sec 0-62mph time for the Long Range AWD model; Euro numbers are to come.

The large electric tech fest

What do you get when two Japanese industrial giants come together to make a car? Something so utterly anonymous it wouldn't look out of place as a taxi in *Grand Theft Auto*. This is the Sony Afeela 1, brimming with smart infotainment and driver-assistance technology, that's been jointly developed with Honda. After years of teasers and the drip-feeding of info, Sony and Honda say this saloon 'can be called a buddy', combining advanced software with 'meticulously refined' hardware. We'll just call it a flop, which it surely will be with an entry price of $89k as orders open in the US.

The old-school V8 convertible

Found the odd one out! Anyway, Aston's Vantage Roadster is as tasty as it looks (and sounds). Engineers claim it's the 'fastest electric folding convertible roof on sale today, opening or closing fully in just 6.8 seconds', which is a bit of an odd brag. But when the 656bhp twin-turbo V8 assures speedy performance on the roads down to the Riviera, you want a soft-top roof to close just as quickly. All of the smart engineering of the coupe remains, including Aston's 'Skyhook' adaptive dampers, as does a carbon prop shaft and Michelin Pilot Sport 5 S tyres. Like we said, tasty.

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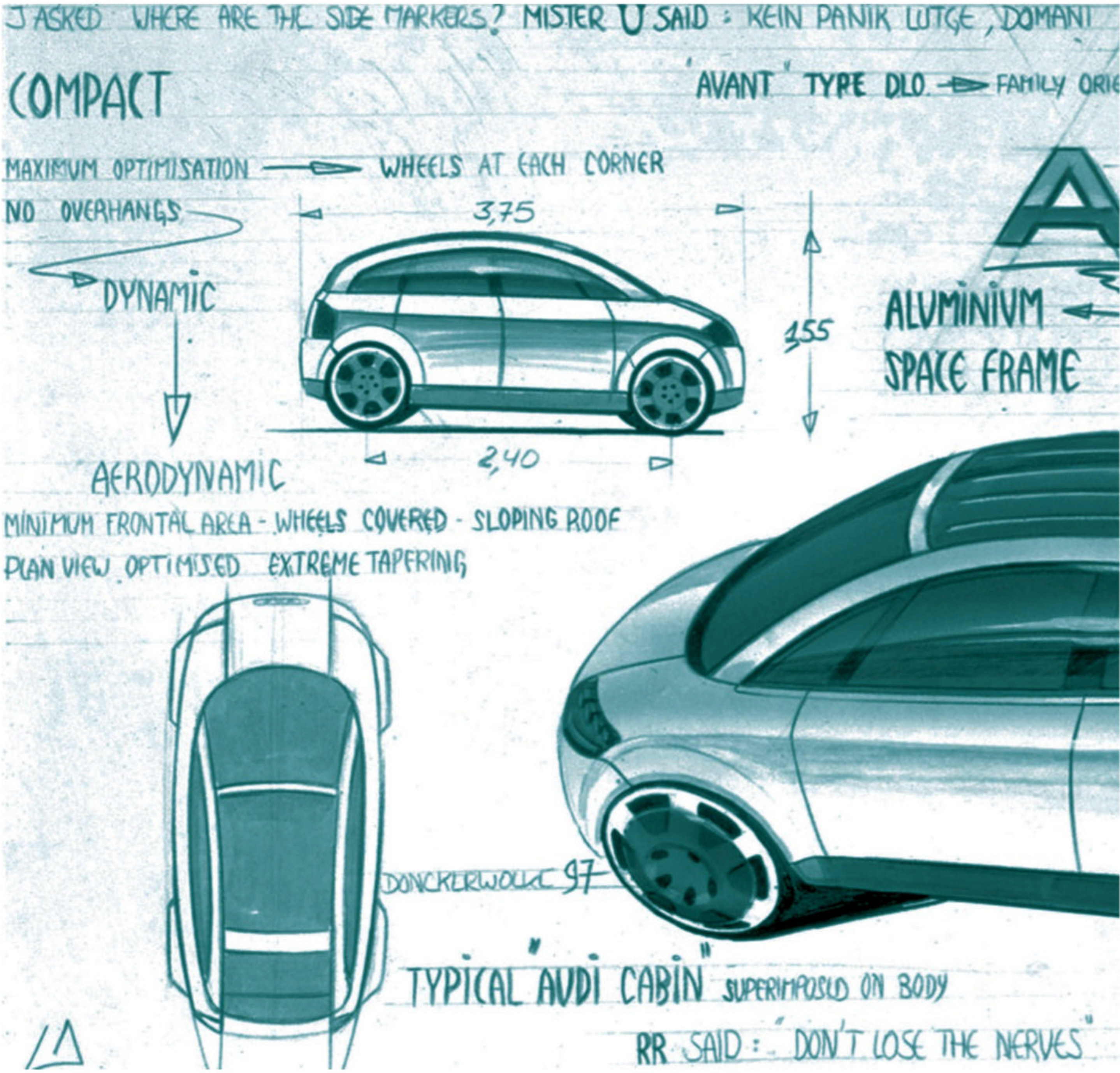

I ASKED WHERE ARE THE SIDE MARKERS? MISTER U SAID : KEIN PANIK LUTGE, DOMANI
COMPACT
AVANT "TYPE DLO. → FAMILY ORIE
MAXIMUM OPTIMISATION → WHEELS AT EACH CORNER
NO OVERHANGS
3,75
DYNAMIC
155
ALUMINIUM SPACE FRAME
A
AERODYNAMIC
2,40
MINIMUM FRONTAL AREA - WHEELS COVERED - SLOPING ROOF
PLAN VIEW OPTIMISED EXTREME TAPERING
DONCKERWOLKE 97
"TYPICAL AUDI CABIN" SUPERIMPOSED ON BODY
RR SAID : "DON'T LOSE THE NERVES"

INNOVATION

There will never be another Audi A2. Sob

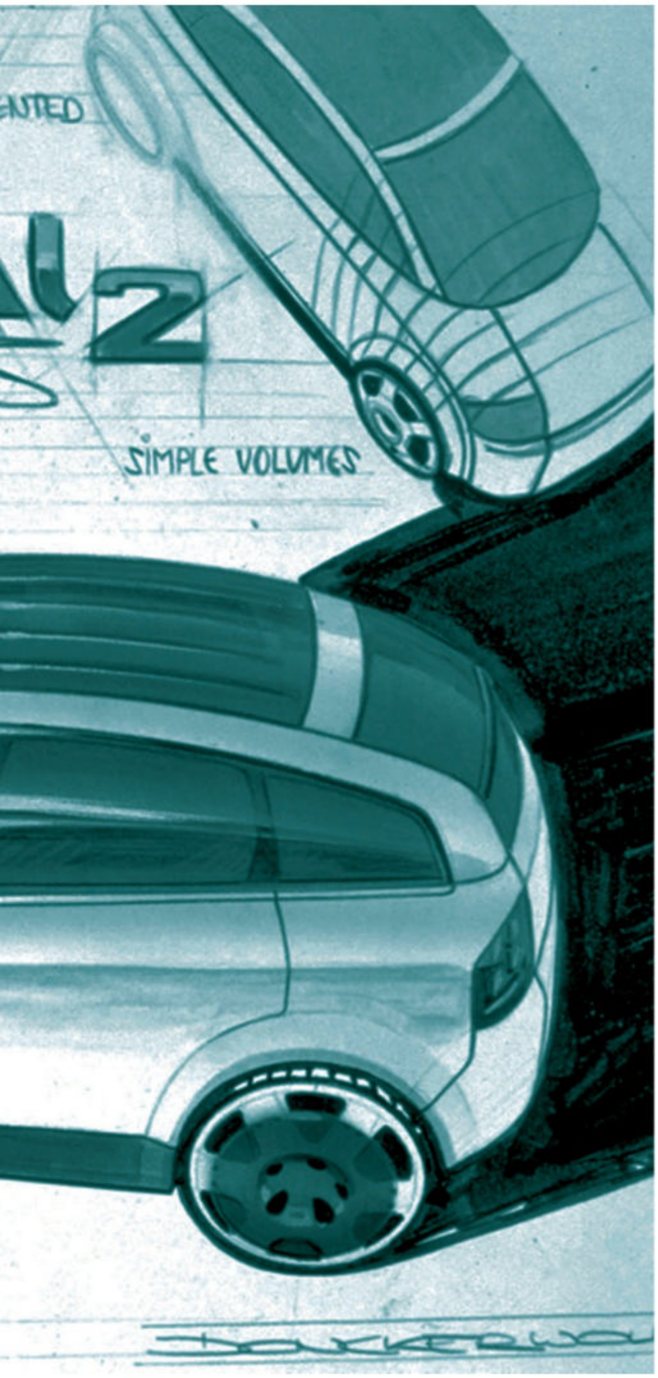
Stephen Bayley Cultural commentator

▶ **In the words of architect** Heinrich Tessenow, 'The best is always simple but the simple is not always the best.'

Take the Audi A2, 25 this year and still superb. In some versions it was capable of 94mpg and had the lowest drag of any production car ever. Aluminium construction meant it weighed just 900kg. Yet it was a sales disaster, reaching only a quarter of the numbers of the contemporary (but in every way inferior) Mercedes A-Class.

It's an example of the German mastery not of efficiency itself, but the symbolism of it. All that sans serif public signage looks modern, but disguises systems of Kaiser-era antiquity. The deception is beautiful and mostly convincing. The A2 appears simple, but it is layered with layer after layer of meaning. Not really simple at all.

Because it was willed into existence by VW Group



Al2 concept led to the production A2, launched 25 years ago

chairman Ferdinand Piëch himself, the A2 escaped Audi's bureaucracy, bypassing all rational audits, eventually to lodge itself in our memory as one of the most exquisite small cars ever. Rational? Actually, not at all. And therein lies its wonder.

It is easy to say what went wrong. God, nature, call it what you will, drives a hard bargain. Aluminium has the benefit of lightness and corrodes less aggressively than many other metals. It is also a dream to recycle. But it is hard to work, requiring special tools and techniques. Insurance-company denials turned even minor A2 bumps into write-offs. And then it was a death spiral.

Of course, this is like complaining you can't put fine Limoges porcelain in the hot cycle of a dishwasher. Practical considerations are not important with works of art.

The belief was that following carefully considered principles, a good result was inevitable

Aluminium was an A2 article of faith: a demonstration of magnificent – but futile – corporate ambition. It was expensive and scared consumers, even as it left a residue of genius. It is a design masterpiece.

Attributing something as complex as a car to an individual is always problematic, but the Audi career chronologies of Luc Donckerwolke and Stefan Sielaff track the gestation period of the A2.

Whoever it was, the A2 designer fully acknowledged the significance of J Mays' Avus concept of 1991. That car established a language of design for Audi that lasted until five or six years ago. From the Avus, the A2 derived superlatively confident, but plain, surfaces beneath which lurked historical ghosts. Plus, exquisite details.

These ghosts included experimental streamliners created by Paul Jaray, whose 1923 K-Typ Audi, like the A2, made no concessions to simplistic notions of elegance. In fact, it was pug ugly, but in a way that persuaded. In pursuit of the chimaera of 'efficiency', German designers often created some very peculiar-looking machines.

Blohm & Voss made an asymmetric aircraft. Anybody who has seen a Hanomag truck of circa 1969 knows the German aesthetic. A '63 Unimog says the same: I don't have to be kiss-me-quick cute to be impressive.

The thing about German design was this: while the Italians were, quite correctly, obsessed with *bella figura*, the serious business of looking good, Germans were obsessed by the serious business of trying to look serious.

Germans believed in systematic design. The belief was that following carefully considered principles, a good result was inevitable. This was a theory which paid no attention at all to divinely-inspired 'creativity', but it did give us Dieter Rams and his white and black boxes for Braun. And he, in turn, gave us Apple's Jony Ive.

And in this region of design history we find the Audi A2. It is the iPod of the automobile.

The A2 may be a design masterpiece, but it is more specifically a German design masterpiece. The national preoccupation with systems and efficiency can perhaps be traced back to medieval guilds and their insistence on specialisation: thus in Solingen you found cutlers, in Mainz watch makers. Factor in the dominant Prussian idea of military efficiency and you have all the forces – by no means all 'rational' – which let Audi flourish.

To be sure, the A2 is not a pretty car. That is like saying the Ossie athlete Katrin Krabbe was no beauty. But attractive and high-performance, certainly. Instead, the A2 speaks of seriousness. Of attention to detail, perhaps at the expense of attention to the larger picture. But we live with details, not with larger pictures.

Making judgements about this car is a treacherous business. It was a commercial calamity. It has admirers rather than lovers. And instead of looking into the future, it is not so much a car of the 21st century as a thing of a long lost and much regretted past.

But one thing is certain. No one will ever build a car quite like this again. As I write this, I am thinking of Brahms' *Deutsche Requiem*.

First drives

THE WORLD'S BEST WRITERS IN THE NEW CARS THAT MATTER

LAND ROVER DEFENDER OCTA

Like a G

The Defender would appear unstoppable, with no let-up in demand five years in. To celebrate, Land Rover's created a six-figure G-Class rival. We drive it

Words Ben Miller **Photography** Nick Dimbleby and David Shepherd

The 300-mile test

NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD

Looks more serious because it is

20-inch motorsport-style wheel is gorgeous

The Defender Octa is not a car to watch yourself driving. As you explore its capabilities – not least the velvety vigour of its V8 acceleration – you'll wear all the usual expressions, of course: fierce concentration, child-like happiness, bewildered admiration.

But you'll also do a lot of contorted grimacing. For this is a car, given the right kind of landscape as a canvas for its art, capable of real ultra-violence. Rest assured the car can soak up the punishment (the Octa's body-in-white is unchanged from that of the core car), breezing through moments of 'shell-twisting catastrophe like a plucky street cat haemorrhaging lives. But it takes a while to recalibrate your brain – and your face will be picture as you do so.

Three examples. Speeding along an empty gravel track, the world appears to have switched to a different aspect ratio. The sky is a vast, unbroken canopy of brilliant blue. To either side, the scrubby landscape – dirt, dust and sand, studded with skeletal bushes – runs horizon to horizon and on to infinity. This wide open space has robbed my three-figure progress of any sense of speed. So serene is the Octa's progress I feel I could step out of the car and keep up with the gentlest of jogs. As ever, it's only when things go sideways that the physics involved rapidly regain a very real sense of meaning…

The track crests a gentle rise, swerves left – despite the scattered gravel like ball bearings, the Octa turns obediently, sashaying gently as it does so – and then dips down out of sight… I'm hard on the brakes but there's only so much they can do, given the time they have in which to do it. The river is dry (with a one-metre wading depth, up 10cm on the standard car, I'd happily take my chances against some water) but the concrete slabs that comprise the crossing will be around long after the apocalypse.

Short of ideas, I close my eyes. Brutal though the transitions are, the Octa appears uninterested to the point of boredom, its long-travel suspension and semi-active damping catching the car's wheel movements like a fast-bowled ball into wicket-keeping gloves.

Half an hour later, getting giddy in the Baja-ready Octa mode (a new drive setting that winds the roll control right off, for unfettered wheel movement, while upping the damping force and setting the throttle travel to full binary), I'll hit an asymmetrical drainage channel (will I never learn?) and send all five metres and 2.5 tonnes of Land Rover into the air at speed and so on-the-wonk Picasso would be proud. There's time to consider a few life choices, secure my water bottle in the glovebox and hastily swallow the wine gum in my mouth. The crash-landing that follows isn't pretty but neither is it terminal (that suspension again; the ECU is able to discern when the car's left terra firma and brace the dampers accordingly).

EDITION ONE

Edition One is all gone. Fight the FOMO

And later the same day, the air springs at full height and with low-range selected, we'll gently scramble down a rocky slope so steep there's simply no way we won't lose the front of the car when we reach the bottom, where it'll rest for eternity, being picked over by the birds and bleached by the sun. I don't even hear a scrape.

Somehow the Defender is a five-year-old car, and five years is a long time. Too long, it seems, to leave Land Rover's designers, engineers and product planners unsupervised. Perhaps inevitably, they've been furiously ideating a taller, broader Defender with more of everything, not least more power (626bhp, for a 4.0sec 0-62mph time, the same as a BMW M2) and more price (£160,800 for the Edition One car; £145,300 for the 'regular' Octa).

The brief? Create Land Rover's fastest off-roader yet, ▶

Pick-up: 0 miles

Never short of visual impact, the Defender is even harder to ignore in Octa spec. Group B-style arch extensions are the obvious clue.

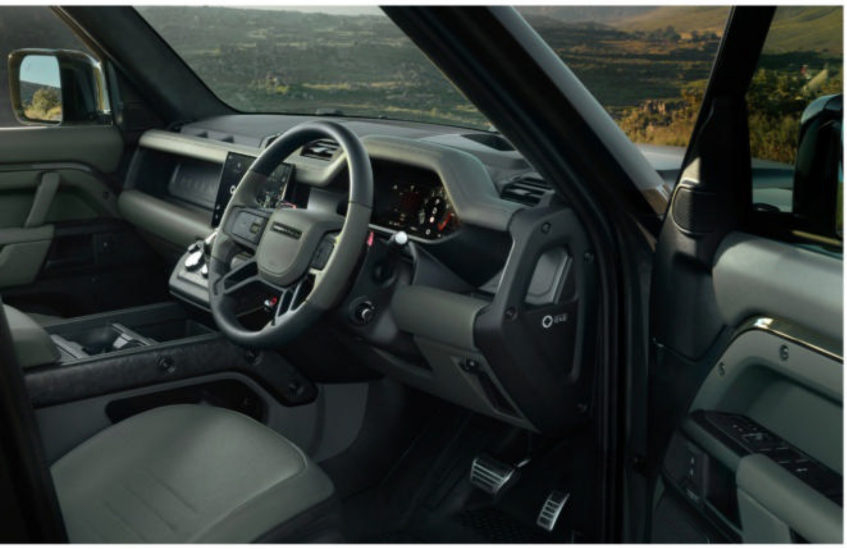
34 miles

Interlinked hydraulic suspension ditches mechanical anti-roll bars… to increase the roll control. Got it? It all makes sense when you drive it on roads like this.

36 miles

BAIN'S KLOOF PASS
For 25 km

I mean, the team did a lovely job on the pass. But it could have been a bit wider… Most Land Rovers make the road feel too small, Octa particularly.



Carbonfibre finish to some interior parts feels odd in this context

as befits a machine set to take Land Rover back into the brutal Dakar rally, and a more powerful engine was right at the top of the to-do list. You can't currently buy a core Defender 110 (the Octa uses the 110 body exclusively) with a V8 engine (the 90 and 130 can still be had with the old 5.0-litre V8 supercharged unit, for now at least). But the Octa uses a version of the 4.4-litre, twin-turbo V8 sourced from BMW that's also deployed in the Range Rover and Range Rover Sport.

But really that's not the Octa's secret weapon. Where the regular Defender runs a normal-ish combination of air suspension with adaptive damping and mechanical anti-roll bars, the Octa's set-up – derived from the Range Rover Sport SV but entirely recalibrated, naturally – is replaced by a hydraulically interlinked, semi-active system giving the car full control over its pitch and roll.

What does that mean? Off-road, it means the Octa enjoys a freedom of wheel movement impossible with conventional roll bars, together with a degree of body control the core car would kill for on road. So, more performance on the tarmac – this isn't simply a more dirt-orientated Defender in the same way, say, the GT3 is a more track-orientated Porsche 911 – and more performance off it, on paper at least.

Externally, you can't miss the broader track widths (by 68mm) and the increased ride height (by 28mm). There are more vents and intakes up front, too, as you might expect given the engine-bay heat the car's forever trying to shift. Inside, the cockpit is familiar from the core Defender; a good thing. This remains a very likeable space: roomy, practical, chunky and industrial, but – thanks to the refinement, strong fit and finish, and quality materials – ▶

Just please don't scrape the wheels

92 miles

Leopards
For 23 km

Like the landscape, the wildlife goes up a notch or 10 in South Africa. But our drive was all Land Rovers, no jaguars.

149 miles

Mount Cedar

The Cederberg mountains have that big-country thing going on. Even the Defender can feel small here.

156 miles

BEWARE OF BABOONS

Just closing your doors isn't enough, apparently – lock it or lose it (to enterprising primates with a thing for luxury 4x4s).

The Octa enjoys a freedom of wheel movement impossible with conventional anti-roll bars

210 miles

Looks great clean, don't get me wrong. But a dirty Defender is where it's at.

218 miles

4x4 Vehicle recommended for track to Wupperthal
4x4 Voertuig aanbeveel

Fortunately, the Octa retains all the core car's all-wheel-drive might, including a low-range transmission for the really tricky stuff.

222 miles

Pivi Pro's quietly become one of the best systems on the market, with its big, glossy screen and lag-free responses. Plus you get physical climate controls: yay.

Steering
Dynamic
Comfort
Gear shift
Dynamic
Comfort
SET UP

Dynamic mode offers plenty of scope for tweaks

Max wading depth is up, and the depth sensors let you use it without fear

Twin-turbo V8 has precision as well as power

> **The quicker steering rack means you work with neat inputs rather than great sweeps of the wheel**

with a welcome twist of luxury. If only the seats hadn't changed. The Octa gets sports seats up front, with hefty bolsters and integrated headrests. They look the part, and the additional lateral support is a must-have if you're planning to explore the car's towering limits on the road or off it. But they lack the pillowy all-day comfort of the core car's; you'll be fidgeting a few hours in.

Heading north from sun-kissed Cape Town, we're off the motorway just as soon as it begins, trading easy miles for a narrow mountain pass of giddying gradients and fiendishly tight hairpins.

The Octa's laudable on-paper ambition of being better everywhere is of course tempered by the reality of tyres. With the giant leaps in active chassis technology over recent years, cars must no longer choose between previously mutually exclusive attributes. But tyres remain tricky. Three are offered on the Octa: an all-season, road-focused tyre on a 22-inch wheel; an all-terrain tyre on a 20-inch wheel; and an 'advanced all-terrain' Goodyear Wrangler (the most dirt-focused rubber Land Rover's ever offered as an option), again on the 20-inch wheel.

We're on the Wranglers, and they undoubtedly have an impact on the Defender's road manners. There's a definite texture to the ride quality, some alien acoustics on very smooth blacktop (not a problem in the UK, then…) and a reduction in outright mechanical grip on the road versus a less aggressively lugged tyre.

But still the Octa boogies. The body control is several cuts above the core car, encouraging you to carry corner speed where the regular Defender suggests you shed it before attempting to change direction. And everywhere you drive the Octa, the faster steering rack – borrowed from the Range Rover Sport SV, it runs a 13.7:1 ratio, down from 17.5:1 in the core car – works beautifully. On the tarmac, particularly here, slaloming between unyielding kerbside blocks, it means you work with small, neat inputs rather than great sweeps of the wheel. And when you head off-road, be it onto fast gravel tracks or towering dunes, that quicker rack helps key you into the front axle.

This steering wouldn't work anywhere near so nicely in the core car, with its greater propensity to roll. But in concert with the Octa's iron-fisted control, particularly in Dynamic mode on the road, it elevates the Defender's fast-road repertoire by a significant margin. Equally sweet are the brakes: a powerful and progressive Brembo set-up with a dedicated off-road calibration for loose surfaces. Like the steering, the braking's power and delicacy pay dividends everywhere, whether you're hauling down from three-figure speeds for a mountain hairpin or picking your way down a rock face on an angle so steep your passenger's dangling from the grab handles.

Could the ride be plusher? It could – anything's possible with the Octa's sandbox of a suspension system. But even in Comfort mode the Octa is no Range Rover, and deliberately so. The engineering team wanted to retain some Defender honesty rather than going full waft, and there's some sense in that. And this is a pretty awesome big-mile road device nonetheless; comfortable, easy, fast.

Then you slow, turn off the road and find that almost nothing – even in this gnarled and impossibly expansive wilderness – is off-limits in the Octa. Unmade roads are a breeze; ditto boulders that would rip the sump from a lesser machine. Deep sand, even when it's the really powdery stuff that behaves more like a liquid than a solid, is no impediment to progress.

After the wilting heat inland – all hot winds and ▶

Dune 3: Land Rovers in space

228 miles

If you can walk up it, this Defender can drive up it. And if you can't, it likely still can. Approach and departure angles are wildly generous.

293 miles

Back on the tarmac, you're waiting for the focused off-road tyre to start driving you nuts. But it doesn't. And Octa looks great on the 20-inch wheels.

337 miles

Back to Cape Town, with car (and driver) in one piece. Land Rover would appear shocked by Octa's initial sales success – we've honestly no idea why.

Octa button on the steering wheel feels cheap; seats are a bit serious

Data

PRICE
£145,300 (£160,800 for the Edition One)

POWERTRAIN
4395cc 32v twin-turbo V8, eight-speed automatic, all-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE
626bhp @ 5800rpm, 535lb ft @ 1800rpm, 4.0sec 0-62mph, 155mph

WEIGHT
2585kg

EFFICIENCY
21.7mpg, 304g/km CO2

ON SALE
Now

RATING
★★★★★

blinding glare – the sea breeze at Lambert's Bay is a welcome change. There are dunes here too, and our best opportunity yet to trouble the Octa's go-anywhere elan.

The sea's so close you can smell it, but soon – as towering screens of sand obscure the view to every point of the compass – the ocean could be a million miles way. My preparations are not extensive. I drink a can of Coke, drop the tyre pressures by half and select Sand mode on the terrain response system. (An oddly cheap-feeling new button on the steering wheel lets you shortcut to Dynamic or Octa modes; a 911-style dial on the wheel to cycle between all the modes would be neater.)

The challenge here is all consuming. There are some patches of level, solid ground – marked by scrawny bushes and Pollock-esque splatters of lunar-looking scree – to which we can retreat. But mostly this about the preservation of forward movement at all costs: about powering up slopes on a touch of corrective lock as sand billows across the windscreen; about surfing down near-vertical drops on a life raft of shifting sands; about judging your speed just-so, so that you crest each climb as much on momentum as power, arriving at each ridgeline in control and ready to stop. And when we do fall short, bogging down and coming to a halt with a screen full of sky, still the Land Rover refuses to accept to defeat. A switch to the high-riding Rock Crawl drive mode, together with some back-and-forth inputs at the wheel, is enough to free us without having to break out the sand ladders.

The V8 is a fine engine everywhere but particularly here. Yes, the old 5.0-litre supercharged V8 sounds better and oozes with charisma in a way this 4.4-litre turbocharged unit doesn't. But this is a great powertrain, with immaculate low-speed manners off-road and, on road, the sheer punch to make this not-light car feel properly fast. And in the dunes, when your mouth's parched with concentration and you can't remember what a level horizon looks like, it's a godsend. You can dial up the 2500rpm required for steady acceleration on sand time and again, with metronomic precision. Yet when the going firms up and you've some speed to play with, sending the Defender sideways on a great wad of turbo torque is also child's play.

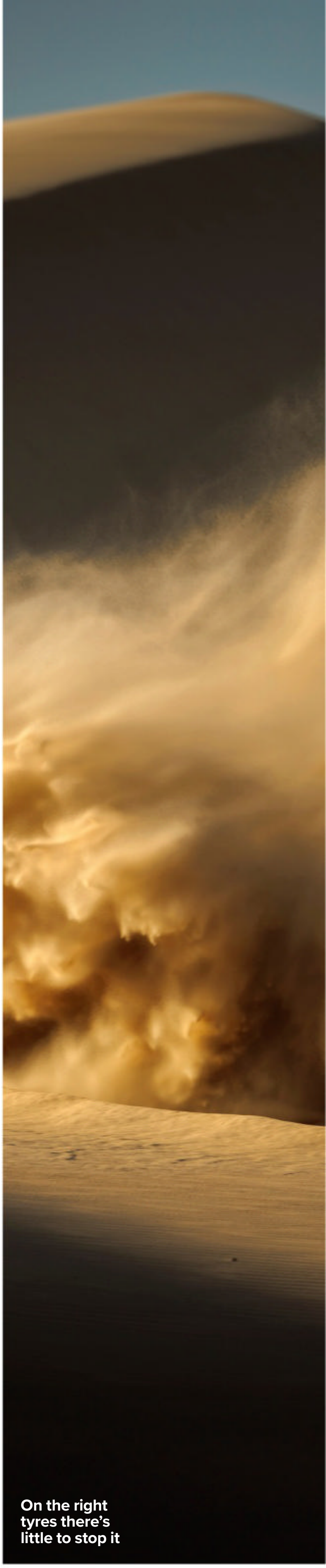
And weirdly for such a car that looks so po-faced, fun really is at the core of the Octa's character. Outrageously capable off-road, particularly at speed, and keener on tarmac too than the core Defender, it's a machine of monumental versatility. But it's also a blast to drive; fast, precise, charismatic and incredibly playful for a 2.5-tonne SUV.

Has the Defender lost anything in translation? Of course. The Octa is a niche proposition, certainly on serious off-road tyres. Just as a 911 Carrera is preferable to the hyperactive GT3, so the regular Defender (sales of which are homing in on 380,000 globally), likely with a grunty and long-legged diesel engine, will be all the car you could want or need 95 per cent of the time.

But, like a GT3, the Octa is a bit special. Begin to really put it through its paces, on road or off it, and – far from coming unstuck – it simply gets better and better.

Next month

FERRARI'S V12 DROPTOP



On the right tyres there's little to stop it

The V8's low-speed manners are immaculate. Yet sending this Defender sideways on a wad of turbo torque is also child's play

Hyundai does things properly, so no surprise this is easy to get on with

It's a family SUV with the roof hacked off the boot

HYUNDAI SANTA CRUZ

Cruz'in, but no bruising

Hyundai's wacky American pick-up is refreshing, fun and easy

It's about 830 miles if you want to drive from Tucson, Arizona, to Santa Cruz, California. Apt, then, that the Hyundai that's been transformed from Tucson to Santa Cruz is fantastically well suited to such a journey: easy-going, fun, comfortable, in fact the most accessible pick-up I've ever driven.

The Santa Cruz has been on sale in North America for the last few years and is built at Hyundai's factory in Alabama. It's 'designed for California', according to Hyundai, which is rather a sweeping statement, when it might be more accurate to say that it's designed for people who need a family crossover but want it to look a bit funkier, with some kind of surfer vibe.

It caused a stir when it first launched in 2021 and recently been refreshed with a chunky facelift, fresh technology and a new, more rugged XRT trim, which is our excuse for driving the car today.

We're nowhere near Santa Cruz, California, or Tucson, Arizona, but at Hyundai's proving ground on the fringes of the Mojave desert. It's a magnificent venue – road, tracks, massive sandpit – that offers us plenty of opportunity for discovering just how capable it is.

Some of the dusty, rocky routes that snake around Hyundai's technical centre are far from being child's play. As well as deep sand dunes and heavily rutted tracks through shrubbery, you need to navigate those super-steep inclines you'd only ever really see at a proving ground. And maybe Lincoln city centre.

You'd think a pick-up based on a crossover popular with soccer moms would be happy with a superficial resemblance to an off-roader. After all, it has a car-style chassis, and is available with front-wheel drive. And you'll have spotted that it's a proper four-door, five-seater – not a 'crew cab' pick-up with a squeezed second row.

But this is Hyundai we're talking about. And Hyundai does things properly.

Very car-like, rather than rugged workhorse

The Santa Cruz is supremely easy to get along with on the road, with its fingertip-light steering, responsive dual-clutch auto, good visibility and plenty of power from a turbocharged four-cylinder engine. It's all about the neat and easy control weights here; the Santa Cruz is a responsive and well-behaved modern car, and nothing like a normal truck – funny, that.

Going off track, though, is where the Santa Cruz springs some surprises. Boot the throttle on sand and, while that four-cylinder engine thrashes and shouts like a spoiled toddler, it grips impressively well. All four wheels, shod in knobbly all-terrain tyres, dig in and leap the Santa Cruz forward into the nearest Joshua tree, if you're not careful. Being close to two tonnes will probably help keep it grounded, too.

The Santa Cruz is a light-hearted and tough car in equal measure, designed for fun but built to withstand whatever you throw at it. It'd never work in Europe, and Hyundai has no plans to bring it to Europe or build it in right-hand drive, but that doesn't stop it being quirky and interesting, and pretty impressive too.

JAKE GROVES

First verdict

Sensible under the skin but fun and funky on top – a Hyundai Tucson on permanent holiday

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

2 minutes
You can really tell this is based on the Tucson, inside and out

11 minutes
Steering's so light you can use your fingertips – pinkies out, folks!

25 minutes
Despite appearances, it turns out to have some serious off-road ability

43 minutes
Not as practical as some pick-ups – that load area isn't very big

57 minutes
It's well executed, and targeted at people who value looks and image above usefulness

PLUS

Neat and easy to drive; feels well built; just enough off-road capability

MINUS

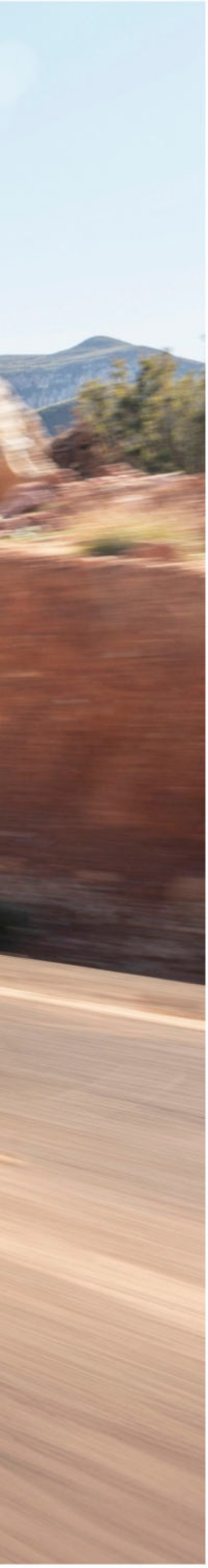
Can't buy it in Europe; not the most useful pick-up; noisy engine

Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	From $28,000 ($40,000 as tested)	2497cc turbo four-cyl, eight-speed dual-clutch auto, all-wheel drive	277bhp @ 5800rpm, 311lb ft @ 1700rpm, 6.0sec 0-62mph (est), 130mph (est)	1919kg	25.2mpg (est)	Now (in US)

It's a car that's grown in maturity without losing its sense of entertainment

PORSCHE
S GO 5007

Same price whether you go for the wing or this Touring version



PORSCHE 911 GT3

Marginal gains

Small improvements add up to a significantly improved GT3

The single best button in the 992.2 GT3 is labelled Assist and located just in front of the gearstick. Easy to reach and difficult to forget, one press of it brings up a sub-menu where you can turn off lane-keep assist, the speed-limit bong and driver-fatigue warning. It also lets you kill the brake assist but only if you're doing less than 6mph.

Buttons pressed, you're free to get on with the main event – driving this 911 in as unadulterated form as possible. The alterations on this facelifted car, available as both winged GT3 and wingless GT3 Touring, are small but yield big results.

Power from the naturally aspirated flat-six remains the same at 503bhp but torque has dropped by 15lb ft; blame emissions regs that are also responsible for the additional catalytic converters that have led to an unwelcome increase in back pressure. In compensation, the car gets eight per cent shorter gear ratios – the same ones as in the 911 S/T – a reshaped, smoother throttle valve and more aggressive camshafts that yield longer valve opening times, on both inlet and outlet.

More cooling helps both the brakes and engine, while there's an adapted bump stop to give an additional 25mm of linear spring travel and a lower front pivot point on the double wishbone suspension.

Weight is up but if you spec all the lightweight components (which will cost £29,223 – ouch!) it helps bring the facelifted car within touching distance of the 992.1's kerbweight. And you can now order your GT3 Touring with four seats. You choose between six-speed manual and seven-speed dual-clutch automatic.

It all adds up to a car with a broader appeal than before, especially in Touring trim. The tweaked steering (still electrically assisted but with more feel and a more linear progression) is delicious and a delight to smoothly pivot from one corner to the next. It's like stirring a spoon through treacle, balanced and less nervous than the 992.1.

You sit low, with revcounter dead ahead

It's a car that's grown in maturity without losing its sense of entertainment. There's good damper comfort over most surfaces and a reassuring level of control, while the feedback and agility are as impressive as ever. As a road car, few can touch its combination of civility and tactility.

As a track car, it's if anything even more impressive. We only got to test the winged car on a circuit but the overriding impression is how close it gets to feeling like an actual racing car. Stability under braking is mighty – because there's now less dive, you can turn in with confidence, knowing it'll bite with surefire predictability. We were in a car with ceramic brakes (£9087 option) and you could get on them later and later into a corner, lap after lap, with zero panic.

Even kerbs hold no fear. I had a couple of laps with endurance race ace Jörg Bergmeister, who didn't hold back when smashing over some sausage kerbs, but the GT3 absorbs and then settles after each. For a road car, it's incredibly at ease on a circuit.

PIERS WARD

First verdict

Overcomes the odds to be just about everything you could want from a GT3, and now with added seats

★★★★★

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Oak green, gold wheels, black window surrounds. Sounds awful, looks amazing (at least in sunny Spain)

5 minutes
First bit of motorway and in Normal the GT3 Touring is surprisingly civilised

30 minutes
Twisty road. Sport mode brings up extra attitude, including a harder exhaust note and auto blip

45 minutes
You sit so low that blind crests can require a bit of shifting in your seat

58 minutes
Battered concrete shows tyre roar isn't quite as damped as I first thought

PLUS
Delicious steering; good balance of comfort and handling; 9000rpm redline

MINUS
Lightweight pack is pricey; only two paint colours as standard

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£157,300	3996cc 24v flat-six, six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive	503bhp, 332lb ft @ 6250rpm, 3.9sec 0-62mph, 194mph	1461kg	20.6mpg, 310g/km CO2	Now

XPENG G6

Mobile anonymity

No one will notice how good this is, unless it's in orange

If this page didn't say 'Xpeng' at the top, I'd have tried to get you to guess just what this is. It could be so many things. A new version of the Tesla Model Y. A Hyundai or Kia. A BYD. Hell, even a Ford if its sudden enthusiasm for selling several electric crossovers all at once is anything to go by. The frustrating thing about its anonymity is that the Xpeng G6 is actually quite good.

So, what is Xpeng? It's a company from China founded in 2014 that bills itself as a properly serious technology business that manufactures cars, as well as having its hand in areas including software, robotics and even flying vehicles. The G6 we've driven here is the first of five new models to launch in the UK between now and the end of 2027, with the next two being a 'starship of tomorrow' called the X9 – a massive seven-seat electric MPV – followed by the G9, a larger SUV.

Two versions of the G6 launch in the UK with self-explanatory names; RWD Standard Range and RWD Long Range. The former offers 270 miles on a charge, 215kW charging speeds and a 6.6sec sprint to 62mph; the latter boosts range to a claimed 340 miles and lifts the charging rate to 280kW, while dropping the 0-62mph sprint to 6.2sec. Xpeng models run on an 800-volt electrical system, and come armed to the teeth with tech; no complicated choice of spec levels to pick from – just one, fully loaded. Prices aren't locked in yet but should hover around the £45k mark.

Beyond the bland bodywork is an interior that is… also quite bland. But start poking at things, and you soon realise the G6 is really solidly built and trimmed with some lovely materials. There are supportive seats, a high centre console with double wireless chargers, big storage cubbies, and screens so crisp and quick to react you'd wonder if they've been nicked from Tesla direct.

Which is a good thing and a bad thing; there's near-infinite customisability in the infotainment, and its rapidity is all good, but you can get a little lost in some of the settings menus. The only real interior clangers are the old Mercedes drive selector and indicator stalks; most won't notice or care that they're old Merc bits, but they feel a bit cheap and naff when the rest of the cockpit resolutely doesn't.

Bland inside, too, but high-quality

Where it does separate itself from Tesla is the ride; it's a little firm, but it's not harsh – at least making some effort to mask potholes where a Model Y would jump straight into them. It's also impressively refined inside with low wind and tyre noise, and well-damped thuds from the suspension. The steering feels a little overly assisted but it's accurate and, thanks to being rear-wheel drive, pivots neatly but grips when you give it a bootful of throttle. The standard-fit Michelin Pilot Sport tyres help here; no cost-saving unbranded rubber here.

Xpeng, then, has tried its hardest to keep up with the very best in what is one of the most crowded classes of EV right now, and has mostly succeeded. The G6 is smooth, refined, spacious and well built. But we reckon it'll struggle to stand out.

JAKE GROVES

First verdict

Will remain under the radar when there's so much competition. Which is a shame, because it's good

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

4 minutes Interior is much more impressive than the exterior – proper quality

13 minutes Perfectly quick enough…

27 minutes …and perfectly good enough to drive

45 minutes Very quiet, mind, and the ride is plump – not crashy

59 minutes Just need to remember where I parked it – the looks won't help

PLUS

Roomy and well-made interior; balanced ride; plenty of range and performance

MINUS

Screen can get busy; synthetic steering

Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	From £45,000 (est)	88kWh battery, e-motor, rear-wheel drive	276bhp, 324lb ft, 6.2sec 0-62mph, 124mph	2120kg	3.5 miles per kWh, range 340-354 miles, 0g/km	February

The G6 is really solidly built and trimmed with some lovely materials

Neat, but very generic, with strong echoes of the Model Y

Outside it's overwhelmingly familiar, but get in and you're struck by the differences

An actual engine lurks behind the grille; for electric, go A4

AUDI A5

When five ate four

What used to be the A4 is now the A5: Audi's ever-evolving rival for the BMW 3-series and Mercedes C-Class

This is an A4. Except it's not. It's an A5. But different to the old A5. You what?

This conversation will be doing the rounds for a while as people get used to Audi's recent burst of name rejigging, making all of its combustion cars odd-numbered, leaving even numbers free for EVs.

It's a new car, and not just a new badge, but in many ways it's similar to the outgoing A4 it replaces.

I mean, just look at it. Frowny face. Big catfish grille. A couple of cuts and creases up the side and big wheels with some tyre rubber smeared around the edges. And, because this is 2025, the potential for the lights to be customisable and animated. Looks like an Audi, then.

There's a Saloon model (which in fact isn't a saloon by any regular definition, but a five-door hatchback), as well as a traditional Avant estate. Petrol engines, offering 147bhp and 201bhp, and a diesel also making 201bhp, have launched first, with plug-in hybrid models to arrive later in 2025.

Regardless of powertrain, power is sent to the wheels via a seven-speed dual-clutch transmission, with currently only the top-end diesel offering quattro all-wheel drive. If you're after something sportier, the S5 also makes a comeback with some tuneful and potent V6 goodness, laying the groundwork for an upcoming RS5 PHEV.

Priced from £41,950, your A5 can come in Sport, S-line or Edition 1 trim. Sport includes LED headlights, heated front seats, adaptive cruise, 360° parking assistance and a load more. S-line is all about the look, while Edition 1 versions feature matrix headlights, electric front seats and a passenger display. Our test car is an all-singing, all-dancing diesel Edition 1 Avant, clocking in at a dizzying £57,525.

From the outside it's overwhelmingly familiar, but the moment you get in you're struck by the differences. The infotainment design, shared with the new Q6 e-Tron, feels leagues ahead of what you'd get with the ▶

THE FIRST HOUR

30 seconds
Are we sure this is the new one? Barely looks any different

2 minutes
Ah, it's very different inside, though, including a lot of gloss black

14 minutes
This diesel is whisper quiet

26 minutes
Tyres are noisy, mind

39 minutes
Argh – heated steering wheel on by accident again!

54 minutes
Handles neatly, goes well, isn't in-your-face about it. Audi does Audi

PLUS

Supreme build quality; quiet diesel; neat to drive

MINUS

Noisy standard-fit tyres; tight rear space; some switchgear frustrations

Expect usual A4 levels of feel and you'll be pleasantly surprised

Five generations of A4 Avant, and now the new A5, have kept faith with the format

Boot is good shape, but all-wheel drive eats into space

> **It doesn't take long to notice Audi has made some good progress with the ride and steering. There's a pleasing neatness to it all**

Audi's long-standing rivals, the BMW 3-series and Mercedes C-Class. That enormous, curved screen, which Audi likes to call a 'digital stage', sits high compared to the seating position and dominates a lot of your vision. It looks great to me, works quickly and is largely intuitive.

It's also impressively well built in here, as the best Audis always have been.

But there are areas that aren't so impressive. Audi remains a victim of the misguided fad for putting haptic buttons on the steering wheel. It's nonsense, and it meant I was regularly changing the volume of the audio system without meaning to.

The one-panel-does-all set of switches on the driver's side will get mucky quickly. Piano black gloss finish is the culprit here – naturally a must if you're including these haptic buttons, but we do yearn for the days when your Audi centre console was trimmed in some lovely-feeling brushed aluminium instead.

Space in the back is fine for shorter adults and children but becomes a problem if you're a tall adult sat behind a tall driver. The very clever blind-less panoramic sunroof option cuts into headroom, too. Boot space is decent, with a wide aperture, and only a smidge smaller than a 3-series.

Usually when you drive an Audi, words like 'numb' and 'firm' get thrown around quite a bit in describing the ride and steering. But it doesn't take long to notice that Audi's made some good progress here.

Some of this is down to the architecture beneath; the new Premium Platform Combustion set-up that'll underpin everything with an engine Audi builds from A5 and up is brand new, and here it comes equipped with adaptive dampers as standard.

Is it sharp and taut like a BMW? Nope, still not the case – and indeed not what Audi is aiming for. But Ingolstadt's engineers have clearly, after so many years, taken that criticism about numbness to heart and finally done something about it, with particular attention to the steering. It's not the most eager car to turn into a corner, but there's a pleasing neatness to it all and a little more feel than there has been previously.

Screens are great, switches are not

What's improved most is the ride quality, thanks to those adaptive dampers. Leave your A5 in Comfort mode and it can settle into life as a fuss-free commuter car with proper softie suspension that absorbs the lumps and rounds off the sharpest jolts – very welcome if your car is running on the larger 19-inch wheels, with their potential for making some journeys less than smooth. That said, tyre noise from the Bridgestone Potenzas fitted to our car took the edge off the refinement.

Which is a shame, as the diesel engine is impressively quiet. Yes, there's some gravelly grumble as the engine warms up, but on the move and at middling revs it's remarkably composed. Performance is perfectly reasonable, too, and enhanced in this case by Audi's new MHEV Plus system.

This mild hybrid assistance is for now available only on this engine and the V6 in the S5, and it's designed to act more like a full hybrid – even allowing sleek coasting and low-speed driving in traffic with the engine off.

The tech broadly works, proving handy when you're stuck at a crawling pace and want some smooth acceleration without the gearbox jolting. You can also feel the e-boost working when you floor it, making your junior diesel exec feel more athletic than it may appear. It falters slightly at junctions, mind, not quite waking the engine up quickly enough for a speedy launch out of a roundabout, for example.

The same can be said of the S5. The V6 in there surges rather than explodes with power, singing a fruity tune through real exhaust pipes.

The new A5, like the old A4 at its best, is quietly impressive. You might hanker after an S or RS, or for one of Audi's more extreme ventures out of its comfort zone, but this reborn heartland estate does a very good job of handling the basics and making every journey that little bit special.

JAKE GROVES

First verdict

Very much business as usual – a largely sorted and well-behaved executive car with a love it/loathe it interior

★★★★☆

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£57,525 (Edition 1 Avant TDI)	1968cc turbodiesel four-cylinder, seven-speed auto, all-wheel drive	201bhp @ 3800rpm, 295lb ft @ 1750rpm, 6.9sec 0-62mph, 147mph	1900kg	49.6-54.3mpg, 135g/km CO2	Now

Opinion

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THAT JAG + SCOUT REBOOT + OLD vs NEW MERC

Letter of the month

Sound choice

I was very interested to read in the January issue's Our Cars section that an Audi S3 has joined your fleet. I took delivery of an S3 Vorsprung in September.

It is a super little car.

Due to medical, practical and accessibility issues I have downsized from a wonderful Porsche 911S. Do I miss the Porsche? Of course I do. Would I have my old car back? Yes. Would I buy another Porsche? No.

The S3 is proving to be quick, responsive, surefooted and very practical. My wife loves it and I invariably end up driving her Q5.

Christopher Waghorn

Looks lovely, doesn't it? And, further to recent letters about some Audis being aggressively driven, surely that doesn't apply to any in this colour. Fact? CO

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Right idea, wrong execution

I do understand that the management at Jaguar must have been given a brief to find something new, original and exciting, but the Type 00 concept (January cover story) is wide of the mark. Of course it's difficult, but it's ugly, ill proportioned and far too different from anything else on the market, to a staggering extent.

It seems they have no understanding of the market they are attempting to re-enter and will be gone inside a very few years, sadly.

David Imrie

Thinking Bug

I agree with Ben Oliver – the new 'jaGuar' looks very similar to Jean Bugatti's incredible designs. I'm looking forward to the production model! I might buy a three-year-old one in the future for perhaps £60k.

Peter Wood-Hill

Too different? Too familiar?

Your analysis of the coupe previewing a future Jaguar was both balanced and thorough. Yes, it is different – but forward looking it is not. As you noted, the lengthy bonnet is mostly empty space. Indeed the profile looks like a drawing, executed with straight lines rather than elegant curves, of a Ferrari 365 GTB 4 Daytona, and finished off with a rectangular nose.

If Jaguar is to live up to its claims of breaking with the past and becoming a slightly cheaper Bentley, it needs to create a new identity. Bentley coupes echo the beautiful Continental coupes of the 1950s. They have history on which they can draw.

If Jaguar is determined to make a clean break with the past and create a new aesthetic they still have a long way to go. The brand's future depends on it.

David Hall

As well as, not instead of

Jaguar's all-or-nothing gamble may be a massive mistake. Surely the production cars that follow the concept could form the top end of the existing range. Throwing away those cars signals that Jaguar just can't be bothered to accommodate their traditional customer base any more. Loyalty runs two ways.

Why has the existing range not sold in high enough volumes? The cars are good. I fear the real reason is the service/maintenance/dealership experience. Customers paying £100k will surely have very high expectations.

Get the customer experience right for ALL and they will stay and aspire to the premium models.

Vince Cerone

Unbeatable value

Interesting to note that your first drive of the Vauxhall Frontera (February issue) doesn't mention the Dacia Spring. It seems Dacia might have been outplayed, given the value

The jury is out, and may be for some time

for money of the newcomer. Sure, the Vauxhall is slow compared to many EVs, but it's much quicker than the Dacia.

It's a stupidly good value car to the point that you wonder if Vauxhall is becoming a non-profit organisation.
James Kendall

The Frontera is significantly bigger than the Spring, and more conventional in its performance and range, so direct comparisons don't really work. But yes, you're right, it's very good value. CO

Look again

Stephen Bayley's analysis of current retro trends in car design (Agenda, December) was perplexing.

I think it's safe to say that people have been complaining about car design for decades, so this 'crisis' seems much ado about nothing. If anything, the increasing number of auto makers and brands is increasing the diversity of designs.

The criticism of Scout seems particularly ill-conceived. How exactly is it tofu instead of steak? Is it incapable of off-roading? No. Is it limited to carrying light loads? No. Does it have limited space for people and cargo? No.

The only thing that Bayley seems to have a real problem with is that it's electric (and, even then, there is a range extender available). And as for the original Scout being 'not exciting', it was an SUV that beat the legendary Ford Bronco to market by four years – and the prices you see for vintage Scouts on auction sites suggest a level of excitement certainly does exist.
Adam Bernard

Georg is also backing green for 2025

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The big man

What a wonderful piece from Georg Kacher in your January issue, comparing old and new Mercedes S-Classes.

I share his appreciation of a good S-Class, and I suspect that I would have reached the same verdict if I had driven the same cars that Georg is photographed in. But there's the caveat that the older car was one lovingly cared for by Mercedes, so it was seen at its best.

There are doubtless some independent specialists who could do a similar job if presented with a suitable car and a suitable pile of cash, but I'm not sure there's one in my town.

In our haste to highlight what's so good about some older cars, we shouldn't overlook the dull reality: they generally need a lot of looking after, whereas a new or nearly new Merc should be very little trouble.

Sorry to be so prosaic. Anyway, terrific story from someone who has been writing for *CAR* for as long as I've been reading it, which is a terrifyingly long time.
Barry North

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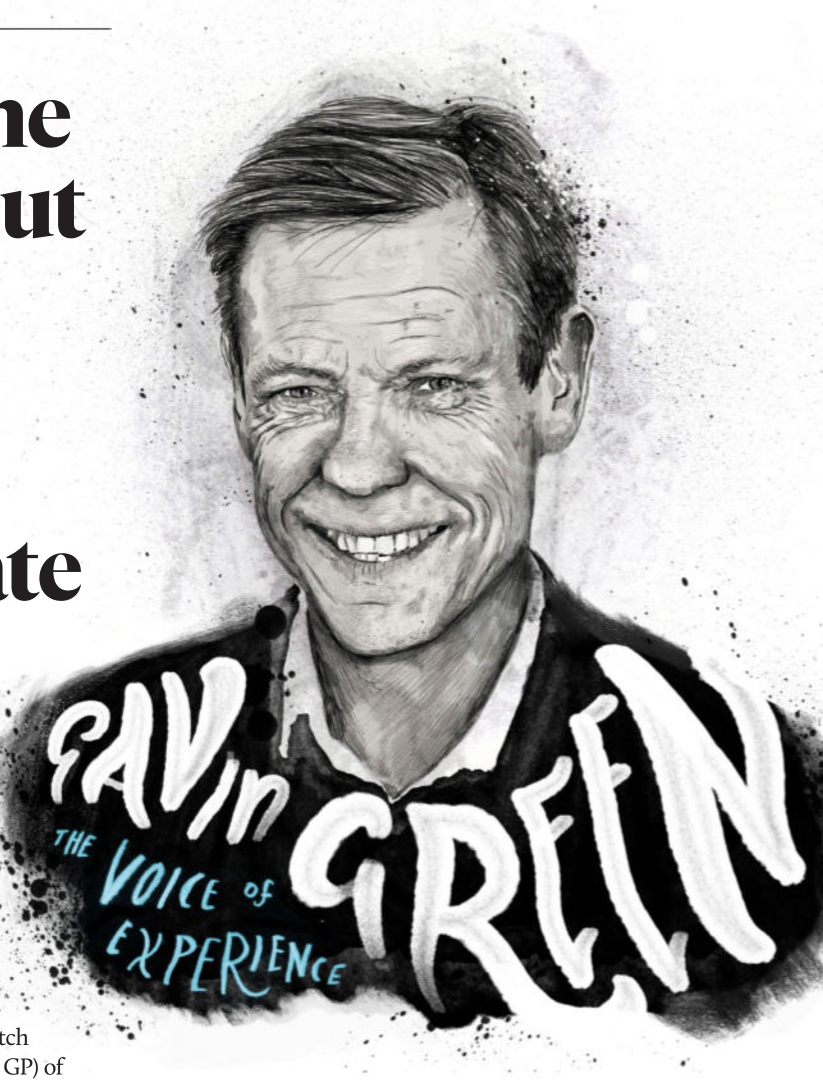
‘Fangio won the title in his debut season for Ferrari, a feat Hamilton will hope to emulate this year’



This season Lewis Hamilton becomes the 13th Brit to race for Ferrari in F1. He’ll hope to emulate Mike Hawthorn (1958) and John Surtees (1964) by winning the world title in red. He’ll also hope to match Nigel Mansell’s feat (1989 Brazilian GP) of winning his first race for the Scuderia.

All were hired by Enzo Ferrari (Mansell was the last driver the Old Man personally selected). Of course much has changed since Enzo died in August 1988.

In Enzo’s day, if they didn’t like the money, plenty of other drivers wanted their place. John Surtees, for example, wanted to buy a Ferrari (a 330 GT) when he joined the Scuderia in 1963. Enzo offered him a 15 per cent discount and then deducted that from his salary. Kiwi Chris Amon, Ferrari’s best driver in the late ’60s, received no salary at all, just a cut of the prize money. When Phil Hill became America’s first world champion (in 1961) the Old Man tried to reduce his salary.

Enzo must have mellowed by the time Mansell joined. He gave him an F40.

Some Brits prospered at Ferrari, some did not. Peter Collins, who won three GPs for Maranello (1956-58), was a favourite of the Old Man, partly because he spoke good Italian and embraced the Italian lifestyle. Lewis lives nearby in Monaco – Gilles Villeneuve could famously drive the 350 miles from Monte Carlo to Maranello in two and a half hours – but his new team-mate, Charles Leclerc, is already well established at Ferrari.

Collins fell out with Ferrari towards the end. So did Surtees and the under-rated Brit Tony Brooks, a two-times GP winner for Ferrari in 1959. He had a chance of winning the world title at the season-ending US GP but pitted to get possible damage investigated. (The ’50s was a notoriously dangerous decade in F1, and Brooks didn’t want unnecessarily to risk joining the roll call of fallen heroes – which included poor Collins, killed at the Nürburgring in 1958.) Enzo later dismissed Brooks as ‘too cautious’.

Niki Lauda also fell out with Ferrari, quitting straight after wrapping up his 1977 world title. He walked out with two races of the season remaining and bid the red team good riddance.

The calculating Lauda never connected with the *tifosi*, unlike ‘Il Leone’ Mansell. His exuberance won over fans, and he won three races for Ferrari, but wouldn’t become world champion until rejoining Williams.

Lewis is the sixth former world champion to join the Scuderia – after Juan Manuel Fangio (1956), Alain Prost (1990), Michael Schumacher (1996), Fernando Alonso (2010) and Sebastian Vettel (2015). Only Schumacher and Fangio would win the title for Ferrari.

There are some striking parallels between Hamilton and Fangio. Like Lewis, the Argentinian joined from Mercedes and, as with Lewis, was a former champ starting his Maranello career after his 40th birthday. He also won the title (in 1956) in his debut season for Ferrari, a feat Hamilton will hope to emulate. (Fangio then left the following year.)

Two other all-time-great Brits very nearly drove a Prancing Horse car in F1. Enzo Ferrari wooed Jackie Stewart but was put off by the Scot’s focus on business and the talk of legal contracts. (Phil Hill always said the Old Man preferred gung-ho drivers.)

Enzo also had huge regard for Stirling Moss and tried to hire him as a youngster, before the Englishman’s brilliance had blossomed. He tried again, this time successfully, 10 years later. Moss agreed to drive a Ferrari for the 1962 F1 season, factory supported but entered by his favoured team manager, Rob Walker.

A month before his first F1 race in a Ferrari, Moss crashed at Goodwood on Easter Monday and would never compete in top-level motorsport again. He later said his greatest regret was never racing for Ferrari in F1. As Lewis now proves, the allure of racing in red remains as rich as ever.

Former *CAR* editor and long-time F1 fan Gavin Green is now one of the world’s foremost commentators on automotive matters

Illustration: Peter Strain

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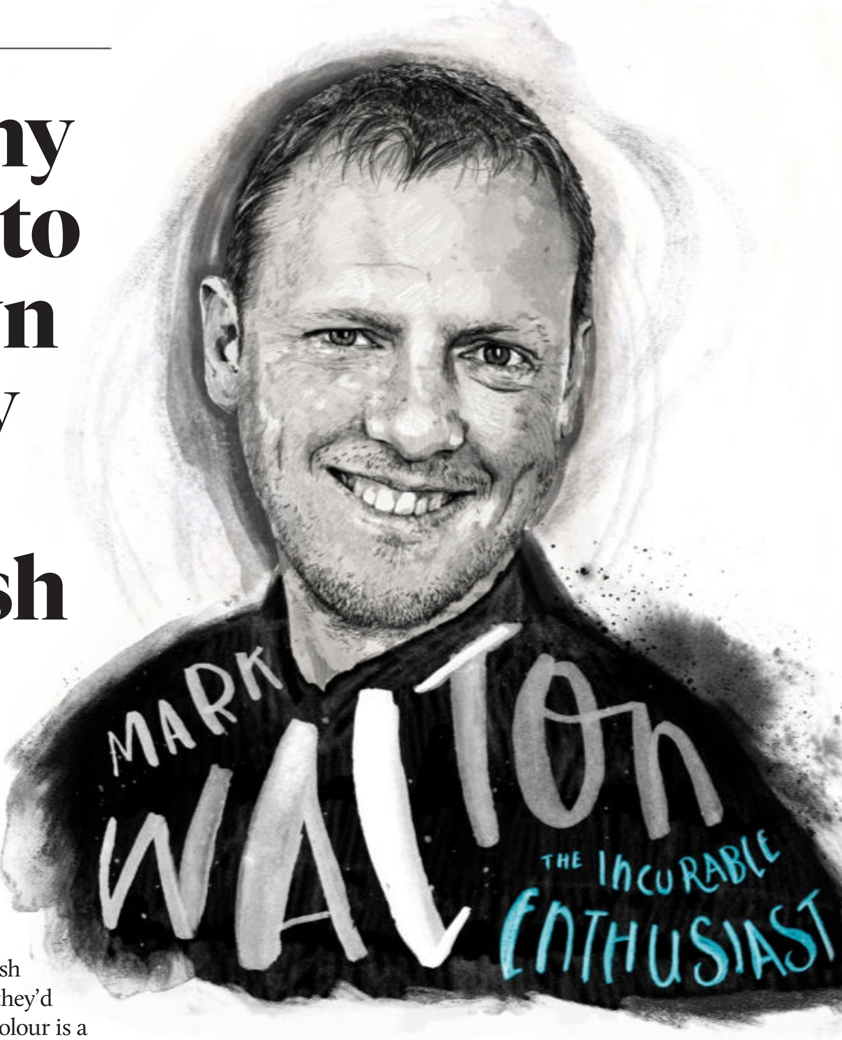
‘The closest any brand has got to having a brown brand identity is Porsche, or possibly British Leyland’



So Ferrari launched its new hypercar in red, McLaren’s was orange and the new Aston Martin Valhalla was a zingy shade of British Racing Green. Sometimes I wish they’d swap it around a bit, but it seems colour is a very emotive topic these days.

You’ll have no doubt heard about the ‘Sad Beige’ lawsuit in the papers? Two social-media influencers, Sydney Gifford and Alyssa Sheil, apparently have nothing better to do than go to court over what Gifford claims is her ‘neutral, beige and cream aesthetic’. To cut a long story short, Gifford posts a lot of pictures of herself wearing brown clothes on Instagram. Gifford claims Shiel is stealing her ‘brand identity’ by also posting a lot of pictures of herself wearing brown clothes on Instagram. Gifford is seeking $150,000 in damages for what she calls her ‘mental anguish and lost income’. Poor lamb.

It’s true, the images posted by the two women are often similar – but then, they are both flogging the same free tat sent to them by Amazon, so surely that’s just the cross you have to bear when you’re ‘creating content’ these days? There are millions of wannabe grifters trying to live off social media out there – and everyone’s posting essentially the same stuff, beige and otherwise. Even social-media megastar Kim Kardashian (with a mind-boggling 359 million followers on Instagram) is so in love with beige, her Christmas decorations were brown last year. Who knew you could get brown tinsel?

Plus, colour specialist company Pantone recently named Mocha Mousse its 2025 Colour of the Year. It’s a ‘warming, brown hue imbued with richness’ Pantone helpfully tells us. Basically, it’s a chocolate-ice-cream shade of chocolate. So expect more beige, not less of it, over the coming months.

None of the car manufacturers have tried to legally copyright their favourite colour yet, but it is weird that there’s a kind of ‘ownership’ of certain hues. It’s like they all occupy their own territory on the visible spectrum – Rosso Corsa over here, Papaya Orange over there – a colour-wheel land grab that the other brands recognise and seem to go along with. Why doesn’t Ferrari launch its next new supercar in British Racing Green for a change? Would Aston Martin sue for mental anguish?

Despite its Instagram popularity, none of the manufacturers ‘own’ beige. The closest any brand has got to having a brown brand identity is probably Porsche. It offered the chocolatey Togo Braun colour for the 911 when it was first launched back in 1963, and during the 1970s there was a whole range of lovely Porsche browns available. These included the caramel-flavoured Kaschmir Braun; the coppery Kupfer Braun; the strangely named Cockney Braun; the orangey Sepia Braun; nutty Tabac Braun Metallic; and Sahara Beige (though really that’s a yellow). There was even a Mokka Braun too.

To show how committed Porsche is to brown, it even unveiled a concept car in brown a couple of years ago: remember the electric Mission X hypercar, finished in Rocket Metallic? It was a new colour, described by Porsche PR as ‘a muted, reserved brown tone’.

If there’s one brand that could enter into an all-out turf war with Porsche for the automotive ‘beige aesthetic’ it would be British Leyland. Like Porsche, BL offered a bunch of browns in the 1970s. They all had exotic Midlands names, like Bedouin, Antelope and Sombrero – plus, of course, the legendary Harvest Gold, fondly known as BLMC Beige. Customers ordered thousands of Minis, Maxis, MGs and Allegros in Harvest Gold, which is a soft ochre brown, similar to the colour of baby vomit, after the poor child has accidentally eaten a dozen ripe bananas dipped in cinnamon. It’s not a nice colour.

You could still order it as a bespoke colour from a supercar manufacturer; they like to boast of offering any colour you want. Imagine ordering a Ferrari F80 in British Leyland Harvest Gold.

Anyways, sadly British Leyland dropped off its perch in 1986 and Harvest Gold died along with it, which obviously saves Porsche the bother of an expensive lawsuit.

Editor-at-large Mark Walton has been sporting comfy brown walking boots for decades, but is not planning to join in any legal action

Illustration: Peter Strain

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GAME, SET & MATCH

The first hybrid 911 takes on recently refreshed rivals from Aston Martin and AMG

Words Ben Barry **Photography** Jordan Butters

Three directly comparable sports cars are rarely refreshed in such quick succession as this, but the Porsche 911 Carrera GTS, Mercedes-AMG GT 63 and Aston Martin Vantage have all come rumbling up like vastly more appealing alternatives to double-decker buses. And we're first to get all three together.

The 911 GTS is the newest car in the test. Like other GTS models, it's a Carrera S with a greatest-hits options package. But what's new, and separates it from the original 992-generation 911 that debuted for 2018, is a significant powertrain update: the T-Hybrid system that's exclusive to the GTS, at least for now.

At its core lies a new single-turbo 3.6 flat-six engine that alone produces 478bhp, but a permanently excited synchronous motor in the dual-clutch gearbox adds 53bhp and 111lb ft of torque (there is no manual option with a T-Hybrid), and a second e-motor packaged in the turbo eliminates lag and can chip in with up to 15bhp. Both are fed by a pint-sized 1.9kWh 400-volt battery up front that sacrifices none of a Carrera's 132 litres of luggage space.

The GTS can't run about emissions-free, you can't plug it in, and 26mpg is merely incremental, but peak system power of 534bhp and 450lb ft bests its predecessor by 61bhp and 30lb ft, and leaves the Carrera and Carrera S models (still with twin-turbo 3.0-litre sixes) trailing more than ever before with 395bhp and 473bhp respectively. Even weight isn't so bad, rising just 50kg to 1595kg (though making the 911's plus-two rear seats optional helps). Our rear-drive coupe costs from £132,600, a near-£13k premium over the new Carrera S, and a circa-£10k uplift over the previous 992.1 GTS – but both its RRP and as-tested price make the 911 the most affordable car in this test.

Nothing here drops you quite as satisfyingly low as the optional (£4622!) bucket seats in the 911, and while the bolsters hold you like a racecar, they're also gorgeously comfortable. If only the backrests weren't fixed so I could set my preferred reclined seating position.

The rest of the interior is classic Porsche – clean, understated lines, the rich aroma of leather, and tactile alcantara for the small-diameter steering wheel. The latter's thin rim slots so easily between thumb and forefinger I can't decide whether to steer with it or play frisbee. Black marks are reserved for mousetrap door pulls and a recessed infotainment screen that's too much of a reach away. But I feel a deep sense of connection to this car, even sitting still.

Fellow tester James Dennsion agrees. He rates the cabin excellent, with the best driving position, best steering wheel and best infotainment. 'Not a bad way to start.'

Fitted as standard with a sports exhaust, the new motor rouses into life with deep, mechanical ruminations and settles to a smooth, pulsing idle. Get moving and the only hint of electrification is the engine's willingness to shut off approaching junctions – it can be a little over-keen to cut out, but it's easily disengaged by switching to Sport Plus mode with a twist of the dial on the steering wheel.

That also sharpens up the responses, but this engine always remains on high alert regardless. Squeeze the throttle in a high gear and it instantly hauls. Drop a cog, floor it and it winds out in one beautifully linear run to the redline, full of abundant power and instant energy. This is turbo midrange muscle with naturally aspirated response and it isn't half strong.

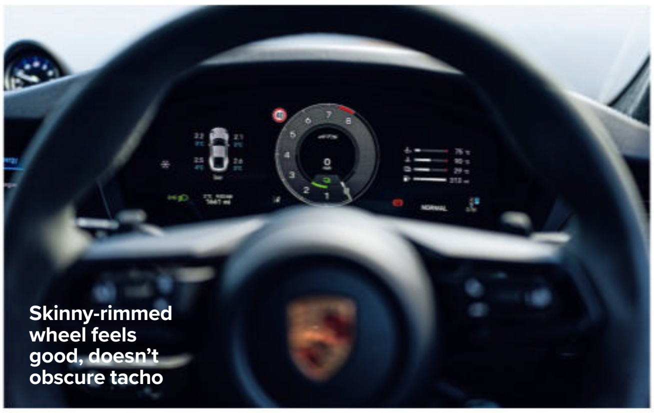
Denno concurs: 'In-gear or running it through the gears, it squeezes every last bit of horsepower and will leave 99.9 per cent of other road cars for dead.' He isn't so keen on the darker sound texture, whereas I like this modern flat-six remix and its building howl, but we both find this a hugely impressive powertrain – one that makes a significant gain over even the 3.0-litre turbo six.

It's a GTS, not a GT, and at times it feels as though Porsche is holding back to protect the GT3. The PDK gearshifts, for instance, are effective but could engage with more mechanical vigour; the redline feels like it calls time a little prematurely.

With 450lb ft ready to chip in immediately from just 1950rpm, the T-Hybrid system now gives the 911 chassis that's so famed for its traction a proper workout, even with 10mm wider rear tyres – far more so than other modern Carreras, and indeed the GT3 models, ▶

THIS IS TURBO MIDRANGE MUSCLE WITH NATURALLY ASPIRATED RESPONSE. IT ISN'T HALF STRONG

GTS is available with all-wheel drive; Aston isn't


Skinny-rimmed wheel feels good, doesn't obscure tacho

Beauty (Vantage) and the best (911)

Bucket seats in the 911 are a £4622 option

Close in pretty much every way; they'd all make a great choice which don't have so much readily accessible torque. It means adding all-wheel drive to this Carrera makes more sense than ever before, but the flip side is the rear-drive models are fantastically exploitable.

On this car's standard-fit PASM adaptive dampers matched to 10mm lower springs, it is also gorgeously supple and stable, almost no matter what. Back off abruptly at motorway speeds and it simply settles where you'd forgive a shimmy. When I seek out the toughest secondary pockmarks and primary undulations I know, the GTS just flows. The ride is remarkably good for any car, never mind one so sporting.

The rest of the package is defined by similar finesse. The steering has gorgeous weight, detailing and response, and the lack of kilos over the nose brings clarity the others can't match, while the chunk of weight hung out behind the rear axle is way more stable and exploitable beyond the limit of grip than popular myth suggests. Standard rear-wheel steer is so seamlessly integrated into this melting pot that it never stands out.

Like Dennison, I'm not quite so confident in the front end as I am with the latest generation of GT products. But everything from the powertrain to the handling fuzzes the boundary like never before.

'Precise, predictable, agile,' enthuses James. 'Makes you want to learn how to drive it properly and really push it like a sports car.'

It's a very high bar that Porsche continues to set. Mercedes-AMG first had a crack at building a 911 rival with the GT back in 2014, but this visually comparable second-generation car breaks significantly from that template, generally leaning more into ease of use – most notably with a transmission bolted to the back of the engine in place of the previous transaxle, allowing for optional plus-two rear seats and more luggage space. Less helpfully, weight distribution also flips from the original GT's 47:53 front-to-rear to a nose-heavy 54:46. Remember the GT is also twinned with the new SL convertible, always a more comfort-focused tourer.

You can get your GT with a trick hybrid system, labelled 63 S E Performance, but both its 800bhp-plus output and its £180k price put it in a rather different league to this 911.

The non-hybrid GT 63 is still much more expensive than the 911 at £164,905 in the UK's best-selling Premium Plus trim but performance is comparable – AMG's 4.0-litre twin-turbo V8 is re-worked here to produce 577bhp with 590lb ft (the latter a match for the Vantage's related engine, a different planet to the 911's 450lb ft).

Ultimate specification fast-tracks our test car to £175,905, but kit that's extra on the 911 GTS is standard for the Merc, including Active Ride Control suspension and carbon-ceramic brakes, seats that are similarly trick to the 911's and all-wheel drive. Adjusted for spec, the price differential isn't quite as large as it initially appears. (The £9k of options Mercedes UK has added start and finish with sparkly white paint and extra driving-assistance kit that we won't distract ourselves with here.)

The AMG is two tenths off the 911's 3.0sec 0-62mph time and beats it by 1mph to a 196mph top end, but it's a bigger car (by 175mm nose to tail) with more cylinders, more driven wheels, more power – all of which helps leave it trailing by 6mpg at 20mpg before it's so much as left the WLTP lab, and – more importantly for our test purposes – makes its 1895kg some 300kg beefier.

But don't think I'm teeing up the AMG as some kind of lardy, unfocused grand tourer because it's most definitely not.

You sit down into standard-fit AMG Performance bucket seats trimmed in nappa leather – a snug, purposeful position, if one not quite as low-set as the 911's and with seat bases that are too firm.

Quality is top notch, with lovely leather, gloss carbonfibre and chrome-effect detailing plus impressive MBUX infotainment served up on a reclined iPad-like portrait screen, but navigating driving modes via the touchscreen or little dials on the steering wheel is far less intuitive than it is in the 911 or Vantage.

In the dark it is also very flash in here with its mood lighting and whizzy screens, like sitting in a cocktail bar. The engine is similarly flamboyant, waking with a real crack of V8 thunder and a large side order of intimidation when I press the starter button.

On the go, the AMG does feel more cumbersome to hustle after driving the 911, not just its extra kerbweight but the way that weight is carried palpably higher in its chassis and much further forwards. The steering has more mass to gather up and get into the turn, and it feels a little doughy and synthetic after the clarity of the 911's helm.

Rear-wheel steer is also more obviously present than it is in the ▶

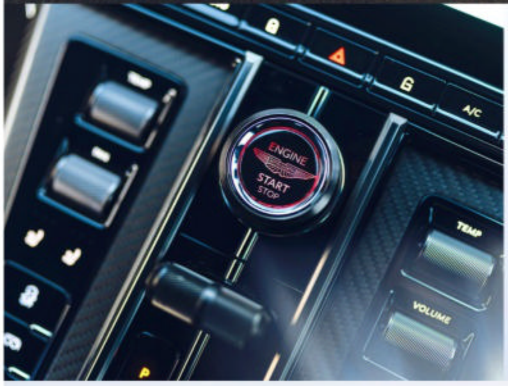
DON'T THINK I'M TEEING UP THE AMG AS SOME KIND OF LARDY, UNFOCUSED GRAND TOURER. IT'S NOT

09:24
SPORT
PRNDM
1.5°C
Traction Control level 8
Average speed 19 mph
Consumption 10.2 mpg

Go fast. Use lots of fuel. Have fun. We're simple souls

Carbon-ceramic brakes are optional on GTS, standard on AMG

Vantage blessed by stiffer body and well sorted chassis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AMG
CARBON CERAMIC

GTS still looks like the sweet spot of the 911 range for many

> **A WELCOME REMINDER THAN AMG HASN'T GONE ALL IN ON TERRIBLE FOUR-CYLINDER HYBRIDS**

Neat, isn't it? Modern, with nods to heritage

DNA shared with SL shows in the cabin

Who let that Hyundai Ioniq 6 in here?

911 and, together with all the other chassis trickery, the sense is of a nose-heavy car that's been persuaded to do something it probably shouldn't. It just doesn't feel entirely natural in those first miles behind the wheel, yet it handles very ably nonetheless.

It takes a little time to dial into that, but I learn to drive more with my wrists, slow down my movements and carry more of that potential cornering speed – you can really hook the AMG into a turn with far more commitment than first impressions suggest. Only when I really carve at a mid-speed corner do I find understeer, and even then it's manageable more than speed-sappingly frustrating.

The AMG definitely rides with something of a firm edge but the combined talents of interlinked dampers and active anti-roll suspension cope admirably with even very tricky surfaces, snuffing out little bumps, and plotting a course over roiling tarmac that gives me confidence to push on. The 4Matic+ all-wheel drive also encourages me to climb all over the throttle without fear of unleashing a monster tank slapper. (Drift mode is available if you fancy one of those.)

JD agrees. 'All-wheel steer takes some getting used to, but when you combine it with the all-wheel drive, the forward-biased weight distribution and the direct steering it's very effective,' he says. 'I'd wager that an average driver would go quicker on an unfamiliar road in the AMG – at least initially – than anything else here.'

After the Porsche and its instantaneous throttle, the AMG's V8 takes a little time to get into its stride – but we're talking a tiny fraction of lag here, not dozy pauses, and really this is properly boisterous performance with angry throttle response, a fierce turn of speed and a seriously rich midrange – the AMG lets rip with such carefree abandon I half expect to see bullets spraying from its exhaust tips. Shame the V8 is drowned out by whooshy turbo noises at peak revs but even then, it's a welcome reminder than Affalterbach hasn't gone all in on terrible four-cylinder hybrids. Combined with a multi-clutch gearbox that whacks in the changes more decisively than anything else here (but can still be refined in gentle driving), there's drama and excitement by the bucketload as I run up through the gears.

As an all-rounder there's much to admire here, and there are 'plus two' seats and a boot that's the most generous here by a margin, but there's no getting away from the fact that the 911 is more incisive.

Time to see how the Vantage compares.

Every car here turns heads, but the Vantage is prettiest of all, slinking into view shorter, lower and wider than everything else – unfortunate traits for humans but rather more appealing when it comes to sports cars. It now costs £165,000, and Aston has bumped this one to £210,185 with treats including Bowers & Wilkins audio, 16-way adjustable seats and carbon-ceramic brakes that save 27kg in unsprung mass (kerbweight is 1605kg dry, or around 200kg less than the AMG full of fluids).

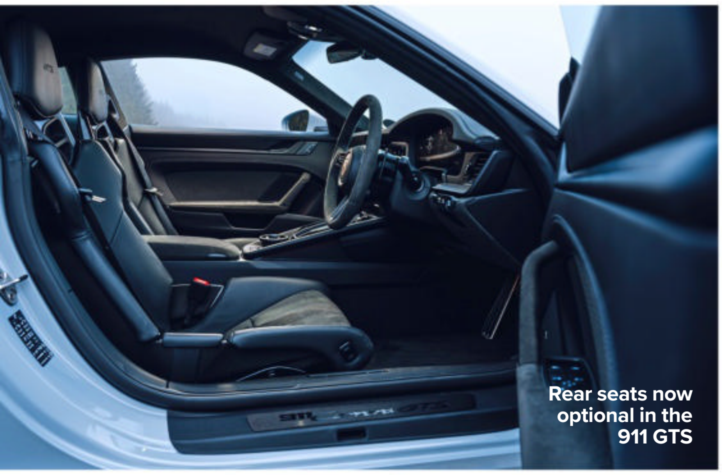
Gone is the Voldemort grille and slightly soft lines of the Mk2 Vantage as it debuted in 2018, replaced by a leaner, more purposeful look with crisp lines, a track widened 30mm with more fulsome hips inspired by the V12 Vantage that signed off the last generation and a rear bobbed like a Manx cat's tail. Every panel bar the roof and doors is new and I can't spot a bad angle on it.

But it's the interior makeover that was more sorely needed, and Aston has delivered with a layout closer in concept to the restraint of the 911 than it is the new-money tech of the Merc. So along with familiar hand-stitched Bridge of Weir leather and comfy seats, there's also fresh 10.25-inch touchscreen infotainment and a mix of gloss-black capacitive buttons and knurled rollers for key functions. It's not perfect – the infotainment can lag, some of our testers found the digital dash too bright at night and the typeface is either too small or too plain or both – but it's a massive step forwards, and more appropriate for Aston in its guise as a luxury brand.

Much has changed under the skin too, most notable being the 4.0-litre twin-turbocharged V8 which now jumps 30 per cent to 656bhp, and 15 cent to 590lb ft torque – the Merc matches the Aston's torque, but neither it nor the Porsche comes close to its power.

Aston claims seven per cent more torsional rigidity for the bonded aluminium platform, plus there are new Michelin Pilot Sport 5S tyres, Bilstein DTX dampers and new Active Vehicle Dynamics chassis control software that plays conductor over the hardware, ▶

GT and cruiser sibling SL were created by AMG, not Mercedes



Rear seats now optional in the 911 GTS

Aston Martin's golden age? Right about now, we say

Aston cabin gets more tech but stays classy

THE ASTON MAKES BETTER USE OF THE AMG V8 ENGINE THAN THE AMG GT ITSELF

helping everything from the e-diff to the dampers and new nine-stage traction control sing from the same song sheet.

Press the central starter that pulses invitingly red and the Aston's V8 roars to life and settles to a fast-paced heartbeat of an idle, already sounding keen to get moving. Slot Drive and the torque convertor gets it rolling instantly; just moving round a car park, the Aston has an effortless glide. At the other extreme, nothing here can match its 202mph top end. Besides, it's the bit in the middle that's the most important, and here the Aston is glorious.

Raw figures say the Aston has 79bhp more power than the Merc with the same torque, but it *feels* stronger on torque. The midrange is just so rich in this car and acceleration so urgent it never feels remotely close to running out of puff, and yet the mapping seems more linear than the AMG's, which means it always feels manageable and predictable to mete out. 'Not quite sure how AMG has allowed this to happen given it's their engine, but the Aston does AMG V8 better than the AMG. It sounds better, revs better and I think it's slightly more progressive,' notes JD.

Gearshifts from the ZF auto transaxle come with a more rounded edge than the AMG's multi-clutch transmission, but they're still extremely quick and more refined when you're pulling paddles at peak revs. They're also positively buttery in normal driving. Combined with a final drive seven per cent shorter than before and tuned to be sharper than the somewhat apologetic original's, the 'box marks another of many steps forward for the Vantage.

In fact, the transmission layout is key to another advantage the Aston holds over the Merc – weight distribution. Unlike AMG, Aston hasn't concerned itself with providing lots of boot space or rear seats, which means that space can be taken up by the transaxle. So having the transmission nestled between the rear wheels and the V8 pushed so snugly back in the nose contributes to 50/50 weight distribution (and 235 litres of boot space to the Merc's 321).

Demonstrating the Aston's better mass centring between the axles, it simply pivots around you in a more intuitive manner than the Merc does. The steering is a fixed ratio, but it's natural and very quick to arc into a turn, keeping a clean, consistent sort of precision as it does so. The rear end then follows obediently and settles quickly, and even on just a breath of throttle to ease the Vantage into the curve, the e-diff already feels like it's locking up ready for a bigger squeeze on the power and a bit of oppo if you fancy it – though traction is actually very good given the firepower on tap.

It's a fantastically malleable car to hustle, plus there's also brilliant multi-stage traction control to gradually allow more wheel slip so you can ease your way in.

The chink in the Aston's armour when it comes to quick point-to-point progress is its ride. Mostly it leans to the firm side of pliant and does just fine, but it cannot flow over the worst surfaces as dexterously as either the Porsche or Merc. It nibbles more than both its rivals over the tricky secondary stuff and – more important when you start to really dig into the performance – has to work very hard to support its mass in compression over primary undulations that buck and heave. You get knocked about a bit, and then back off to calm it down.

But as an object to covet and a brilliant driver's car for the vast majority of the time, the Aston's definitely in contention. ▶

GT is now more nose-heavy than the first generation

A wave of the wand and Vantage gets its grille back

Rear steer is so natural you might not notice it's there

They're not far behind, but our testers were unanimous

FINAL RECKONING

GENUINE CONTEST; CLEAR WIN

It feels harsh to put in last position a car I enjoyed driving this much, but something has to come third, and in this case it's the AMG. Every drive is quite an event, thanks to its agile chassis and brawny V8 engine – and a recent drive on track in the Pro version proved it to be both capable and highly engaging even in those extremes.

The Mercedes also has a useful boot and plus-two seats that make it better than the others for road trips, its all-wheel drive better harnesses performance in all conditions and its clever suspension is superior to the Aston's as well as a match for the Porsche over tricky surfaces. Then again, it can't string together corners as naturally as the others; it's the heaviest, and feels it, and has least the feelsome and natural steering.

For many buyers, the Merc will tick more boxes than the Aston – but not for me. The Aston is the most beautiful car on test and now gets a vastly improved interior in keeping with its breeding. It also puts an even richer twist on the AMG's brilliant V8, bringing genuinely incredible performance to the table, and handles with a more intuitive sort of flair – a benefit of its rear-wheel-drive layout and more evenly balanced weight distribution. Thanks to multi-stage traction control, you can also dip into the Aston's exploitable handling without too much of a leap.

Its damping might not be able to cope with the very toughest surfaces as adeptly as the others, but mostly it rides just fine. It should definitely be taken very seriously indeed.

But it's the way the 911 drives that really got under our skin, from its sublime ride to gorgeously detailed steering and the fluidity of its chassis – both within and beyond the limit of grip. Our sole complaint is road noise, which can become tiresome at a cruise.

All this could apply to any new Carrera, but the T-Hybrid system moves the needle with its huge slug of extra performance, instant throttle response and fuel-saving benefits, and all with only a 50kg penalty – yes, 12.3mpg in the heat of a road test is disappointing, but it's better than the others, and a long motorway run suggests high 20s should be on the cards.

It's a performance hybrid born not to game the test lab but to keep the 911 we know and love on the right side of emissions regulations.

1st

PORSCHE 911
CARRERA GTS

So good it feels like Porsche is holding it back

★★★★★

2nd

ASTON MARTIN
VANTAGE

Most gorgeous on test and a proper blueblood driver's car

★★★★☆

3rd

MERCEDES-AMG
GT 63

Best all-rounder, great to drive, just not as incisive as the others

★★★★☆

WATCH THE VIDEO!

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PORSCHE 911 CARRERA GTS

What's the line-up?
The new GTS debuts the T-Hybrid performance hybrid system with a mighty 534bhp and 450lb ft. Plumbed into a new single-turbo 3.6 flat-six, T-Hybrid helps it best a GT3 on performance and distinguishes the GTS from the rest of the Carrera line-up more than ever before.

▶ **Data**
Price £132,600 (£145,543 as tested) **Powertrain** 3591cc 24v turbocharged flat-six plus e-motor, eight-speed dual-clutch automatic, rear-wheel drive **Performance** 534bhp @ 6500rpm, 450lb ft @ 1950rpm, 3.0sec 0-62mph, 195mph **Weight** 1595kg (DIN) **Efficiency** 25.7-26.9mpg (official), 12.3mpg (tested), 373-mile range (official), 171 miles (tested), 239g/km CO2 **Boot capacity** 132 litres

ASTON MARTIN VANTAGE

What's the line-up?
A very thorough refresh for Gaydon's entry-level two-seater, bringing sharper visuals and a vastly improved interior including new infotainment. The AMG V8's 656bhp takes a leap towards supercar territory, and attention has also been lavished on the chassis.

▶ **Data**
Price £165,000 (£210,185 as tested) **Powertrain** 3982cc 32v twin-turbocharged V8, eight-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive **Performance** 656bhp @ 6000rpm, 590lb ft @ 2750rpm, 3.5sec 0-62mph, 202mph **Weight** 1605kg (dry) **Efficiency** 23.3mpg (official), 10.2mpg (tested), 398-mile range (official), 175 miles (tested), 274g/km CO2 **Boot capacity** 235 litres

MERCEDES-AMG GT 63 4MATIC+ ULTIMATE

What's the line-up?
Second generation of Merc's 911 rival landed last year with more space, all-wheel drive and a different gearbox layout to make it easier to live with. The twin-turbocharged V8 lives on. While Mercedes does offer a hybrid, we're testing the more directly comparable 63.

▶ **Data**
Price £175,905 (£184,705 as tested) **Powertrain** 3982cc 32v twin-turbocharged V8, nine-speed dual-clutch automatic, all-wheel drive **Performance** 577bhp @ 5500rpm, 590lb ft @ 2500rpm, 3.2sec 0-62mph, 196mph **Weight** 1895kg (DIN) **Efficiency** 20.0mpg (official), 9.4mpg (tested), 352-mile range (official), 165 miles (tested), 319g/km CO2 **Boot capacity** 321 litres

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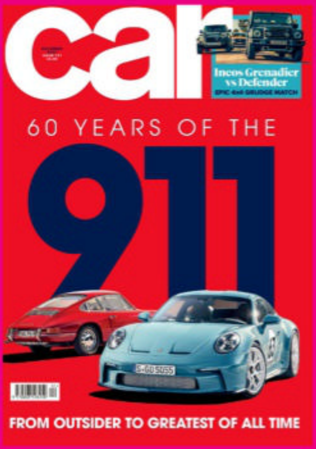
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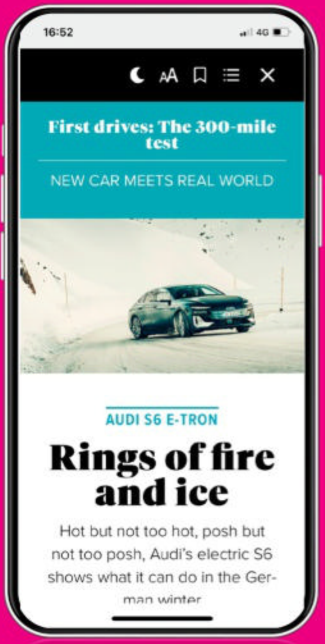

First drives: The 300-mile test

NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD

AUDI S6 E-TRON

Rings of fire and ice

Hot but not too hot, posh but not too posh, Audi's electric S6 shows what it can do in the German winter

20 NEW CARS 25

From bargain EVs to fuel-fired supercar heroes – we rank the 25 most important cars coming soon

25

AMG GT 4-DOOR EV

THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

It's finally time – whether we're ready or not – for an AMG model that makes zero noise

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THE CAR POWER LIST 2025

Not necessarily our favourite people. Some aren't even car people. But here are the minds shaping the next 12 months on planet car

Words Ben Oliver

THE CAR POWER LIST 2025

Who exercises real, personal, direct power over the global car industry, the cars it offers us, and how much we pay for them?

That power can be hard to discern, changes constantly, and is seldom related to an industry titan's job title or production numbers. So once again *CAR* has asked industry insiders who's really calling the shots, and the answers might be surprising. There isn't a single CEO of a Western car maker in our top 10. Instead there are three politicians, reflecting how important electric cars and their batteries now are to economic security, and how tariffs and even trade wars over EVs might reshape not only the car industry but the broader global economy. Four of our 10 are Chinese, and that proportion is likely to grow. Three of the 10 are as active in tech as they are in cars, reflecting how the 'new mobility' depends on both. That number is set to grow too.

But notice too how the old family dynasties which long controlled the car industry are still present in today's list. Real power, like theirs, is often exercised subtly and out of the headlines. Many with more media presence – not only CEOs but celebrity car designers, Formula 1 drivers and the like – don't make the cut.

Our cars are changing utterly, and so is the industry that manufactures them. This list is a snapshot of that change, told through the people who are changing it.

> **The US and Europe might be doing all they can to keep cheap Chinese imports out but those forces are too strong to resist forever**

10

Chung Euisun

Hyundai chairman

As a major shareholder, chairman and co-CEO, Chung Euisun – grandson of founder Chung Ju-yung – is at the heart of the Hyundai-Kia group. Growth has stalled slightly, but with brilliant product, its largest-ever investment in new tech announced for this year and the hope that it might avoid the worst of a US-China-Europe trade war, you can add strong prospects for the family business to Euisun's personal influence over it. Turbulence in domestic politics remains a risk, as does the nutcase to the north.

9

John Elkann

Stellantis and Ferrari chairman

Not yet 50, John Elkann has run the Agnelli family empire for decades and has plainly inherited his grandfather Gianni's vision, ambition and Midas touch. He created the Stellantis group, hired Carlos Tavares to run it, and effectively fired him when the numbers turned red. Appointing a replacement will give Elkann even more influence this year. He and his next CEO have work to do, though: the mega-merger needs to generate more synergies and economies. His other automotive job as chairman of Ferrari must feel like a holiday by comparison.

8

Hans Dieter Pötsch

VW chairman

The current remaking and right-sizing of Europe's largest car maker in response to slumping sales in China and structurally lower sales in its home markets hands hefty personal power to all involved.

That includes, most obviously, Oliver Blume, currently chief executive of both Porsche and the VW Group, and Daniela Cavallo, chair of the VW Works Council. But it's Pötsch who really pulls the strings as chair of both the supervisory board at Volkswagen and the executive board at Porsche SE, the Porsche-Piëch family investment vehicle which is the biggest shareholder in VW.

The structure of the business means the family could sack him, but decades as their grand vizier shows he has their trust, and thus autonomy. However, as documented every month in our Agenda section, the problems facing VW and German industry as a whole are huge.

Pötsch shuns the high profile of predecessor Piëch

7

Ursula von der Leyen

EU Commission president

The swingeing additional tariffs imposed late last year by the European Union on Chinese electric cars began with an investigation instigated by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen into state subsidies for their manufacture: part of her policy to get tough on China.

The vote passed, but with only 10 countries voting for, five against and 12 abstentions. Germany and Hungary were vociferous in their objections, and holding the supporting coalition together will test von der Leyen's political skills. If China retaliates, if consumers demand much cheaper Chinese-made EVs, or if political sentiment turns away from protecting European car makers with market-distorting tariffs or minimum prices and towards hitting 'net zero' emission goals, von der Leyen has an uphill battle. ▶

6

Robin Zeng

CATL chairman

One senior industry leader who has dealt directly with Robin Zeng suggested that we put him at the top of this list. The case for his supreme importance could certainly be made: a secure supply of batteries is essential to make EVs, and as the recent failure of Northvolt shows, Europe and the USA are struggling to establish their own suppliers.

China still dominates this space and, despite his personal preference for a midday nap, CATL's founder – who has an engineering background and a PhD in physics – has built a near 40 per cent share of the market for his company.

Zeng plays nicely with others: he has licensing deals with Ford and Tesla in the US, wholly-owned plants in Hungary and Germany, and a new joint venture with Stellantis in Spain. But whom he chooses to play with might make or break car makers and manufacturing regions, especially as new battery chemistries he is pioneering come on stream.

Zeng's main problem is the US, in common with all Chinese firms. CATL has been added to a US blacklist of firms working with the Chinese military, and a year before there was a bizarre episode in which CATL storage batteries supplied by a US contractor to a Marine Corps base had to be disconnected.

US relations with Chinese technology firms are extremely unlikely to get any more logical under Trump, but if Trump's policies make the US an EV backwater for four years, maybe it won't matter.

5

Li Shufu

Geely chairman

Geely is unquestionably the most outward-looking and internationally active of China's car makers, and it remains firmly in the control of its founder, the charismatic and ferociously driven billionaire entrepreneur Li Shufu.

He's the closest China has yet produced to the great Western automotive patriarchs like Gianni Agnelli at Fiat or Ferdinand Piëch at VW, but he ranks behind his rival Wang Chuanfu at BYD for several reasons.

The first is simple numbers: the core Geely Auto brand is doing well, with sales last year of 2.17 million cars, up 32 per cent and with around 20 per cent of those exported: twice the proportion BYD manages. But overall sales are still half BYD's numbers, and Geely lacks BYD's battery business and its focus on hybrids and EVs.

In fact the empire Li is building lacks much focus at all: with sub-brands such as Polestar, Zeekr and Lynk & Co; the outright purchase of Volvo, Lotus and London taxi maker LEVC; joint venture in new-age Smart; and substantial investments in Mercedes-Benz and Aston Martin, it is a madly diverse group with unclear synergies and a lot of underperformance from its individual components. It has interests beyond automotive, too – railways, for example.

Some rationalisation is required and is rumoured to be in progress, but there's no doubting the energy and pure personal influence of Geely's founder.

He built his dreams. Now he's busy building yours

4

Wang Chuanfu

BYD chairman

The 58-year-old founder and CEO of BYD would earn his place here on his company's present numbers alone. But it's what he and BYD will do next that is more significant, and more terrifying for the established Western car makers.

Last year, BYD's sales grew 41 per cent to over four million cars – including the Sealion 7, pictured – making it the world's largest producer of electrified vehicles (including hybrids), getting within a whisker of outselling Tesla in pure EVs, and likely to place it ahead of Ford and Honda for the first time at number seven on the global sales charts.

This year it will almost certainly overtake Tesla in pure EV sales, and it will start nipping uncomfortably at the heels of GM and Stellantis, each with annual sales volumes of just over six million.

And it doesn't have to worry about finding batteries for all these new cars because BYD is also the world's second-largest maker of EV batteries after CATL. Even Tesla uses them.

But 90 per cent of those car sales are still in China. BYD can sell its Seagull EV there for $10,000. Consumers everywhere else want cheap EVs too: price is the single most significant factor impeding their adoption. Governments in the US and Europe might be doing all they can to keep cheap Chinese imports out and protect their domestic car makers, but those market forces are too strong to resist forever, so BYD's potential for global growth is huge.

BYD has a plant planned in Hungary to make a version of the Seagull which could be sold for €20,000, and it is likely to announce a second in Europe soon. Its European boss, Michael Shu, has said it could be Europe's biggest EV maker within five years – and if Wang Chuanfu can pull that off he'll rise even higher up this list. ▶

3

Xi Jinping

Chinese president

A very senior leader of a major Western car maker recently told us that the Chinese car industry was just one big state company with lots of subsidiaries.

If so, this guy is effectively the boss not only the world's biggest car maker – and, more specifically, the biggest maker of EVs – but also its biggest battery maker and lithium refiner, with an increasingly sophisticated AI-powered self-driving division.

About the only bit of the new-mobility jigsaw that China is missing is semiconductors, which Taiwan still dominates and Beijing isn't happy about.

The reasons China got here are simple: political will, long-term planning and state subsidies, all of which are possible in a command economy, and all of which are now ultimately decided by President Xi. The only reason he doesn't outrank Donald Trump in this list, this year, is that Xi and the Chinese Communist Party don't have the same urgent plans for the car industry as the incoming US administration.

They don't need them. Domestic demand is strong. EVs are likely to outsell combustion cars in China for the first time this year, 10 years ahead of schedule. Sales of foreign-branded cars in China have fallen to record lows as more Chinese start-up brands launch and domestic products get much more desirable; Chinese buyers *want* Chinese cars, rather than buying them on price alone.

The picture isn't entirely rosy. Growth is likely to tail off. There will need to be some consolidation among China's mad profusion of new brands. And the tariffs imposed by the US and Europe will limit China's growth a little, though it will soon start building factories in Europe, and it has the rest of the world to sell to until then.

President Xi probably just finds the panic in Brussels and Washington over Chinese EV exports flattering, and justified.

MG's 4 and other desirable cars are putting wind in Xi Jinping's sails

Trump's aversion to EVs may end up harming the US car industry

2

Donald Trump

US president

No Western political leader has ever come to office with the car so far up their agenda. On his first day in office Donald Trump repealed the target set by the Biden administration for half of all US car sales to be electrified by 2030. But as that target was non-binding the gesture was largely symbolic, and other than 'ending the Biden EV mandate' and doubling down on the tariffs he imposed last time, there still isn't a huge amount of detail on Trump's plans for the car industry.

They will have an impact, but are unlikely to alter the cars we buy much. The car industry plans rather further in advance: model cycles are longer than political cycles. So if the US domestic makers assume that EVs remain the best long-term option – and they do – they're going to keep developing them rather than lose the race entirely to Chinese and European rivals.

Instead, Trump's reforms are more likely to make trading conditions for Ford, GM and the Stellantis brands even tougher. Removing subsidies will make it harder for them to sell the EVs they've already invested heavily in. And higher tariffs on Chinese imports won't help them since the Chinese have already largely written the US off as an export market. But tariffs on trade with Mexico and Canada could kill them – they all rely on plants and suppliers on the other side of those borders.

What car makers want more than any particular policy is consistency. Biden's Inflation Reduction Act seemed a pretty good way of encouraging EV adoption while protecting the US domestic car industry: by unwinding it, Trump's plans might do the opposite. Now he's in office, Trump might pay heed to industry leaders other than Elon Musk, and moderate his plans a little. But don't count on it. ▶

Not like other CEOs, or indeed other humans

1

Elon Musk

Tesla CEO

Love him or abhor him, there is no question who wields the greatest personal influence over the car industry.

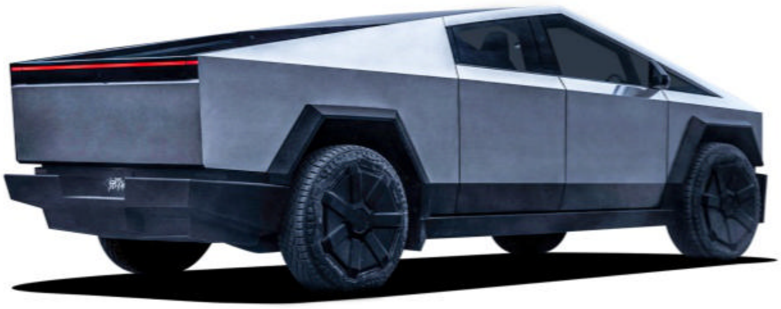
Some of his calls have been long-term and visionary. Others, such as his support for Donald Trump, are short-term and tactical. But he generally gets it right, showing a decisiveness and prescience the leaders of bigger, older, slower-moving corporations can't match. He is CEO and largest shareholder of a business valued at well over a trillion dollars since its recent, post-Trump surge, and which makes more EVs (just) than anyone else. All that, plus the personal mojo, puts Musk comfortably at the top of this list.

He kickstarted the EV age through simple force of will: Tesla wouldn't have made appealing, viable cars without his complete rejection of engineering and business orthodoxy and the insane demands he placed on engineers. Privately, the leaders of the legacy car makers admit Tesla's success left them with no option but to follow. They – and President Trump – may rail against tough emissions targets, but it was Tesla that made legislators think it might be possible to meet them. Musk created the modern EV market.

Tesla's annual sales were down slightly last year, and it's likely to lose its position as the world's biggest EV maker to BYD this year. Tesla's profitability has also slipped of late, but it still has a massive advantage over US rivals such as Ford, which currently loses around $5bn annually on its EV programmes. That will help Tesla ride out Trump's planned cessation of EV subsidies in the US. Tesla will still make money: Ford and the others will bleed harder.

Tesla has plants in the US, Europe and China, so while not immune to the effects of a trade war, it is better placed than any other EV maker to sell where it builds and simply avoid the issue. Same for battery supply: it already produces its own 4680 cells at scale in the US and also has plans to refine its own lithium there. It's well advanced on self-driving, too.

Musk's close affiliation with a divisive Trump administration and his intemperate outbursts on X makes him and Tesla toxic to some. But the broader Tesla mission no longer relies on selling pricey EVs to principled, wealthy, Western consumers. It's about monetising services and rides and AI and robotics, and we don't see much bar a surprise retirement or complete personal implosion to threaten Elon's spot at the top of this list next year.



Cybertruck is the exception in a largely dated – but still huge-selling – Tesla line-up

WHO DIDN'T MAKE THE CUT?

Picking a top 10 is a subjective business, and there are plenty who didn't make our list but might make yours. There's nobody from Toyota, for instance, as CEO Koji Sato is probably too restricted by Japanese conservative corporate governance to have much real personal agency, and Akio Toyoda remains chair but doesn't have executive power or a significant shareholding.

None of the CEOs of the 'legacy' car makers has the mojo of a Marchionne or a Tavares. The CEO title alone doesn't let you do what you want, and the geopolitical firestorm around EVs and tariffs means they spend more of their time reacting than instigating.

By contrast, there are plenty of new, privately-owned Chinese car makers with brilliant product and often clever self-driving tech whose influence is on the rise and who might make the top 10 next year – William Li at Nio for one. Huawei, Xiaomi and Apple's manufacturing partner Foxconn are all getting into the car business, and their CEOs are likely to make next year's list too.

The decisions Nvidia's Jenson Huang makes about who gets his chips for AI and in-car use can be transformative, and the same goes for those who control self-driving tech. The 32-year-old London-based Kiwi Alex Kendall (right) will soon announce which car makers will get Wayve's AI-powered ADAS and self-driving packages first. The competitive advantage he can bestow gives him proper power.

Then there's the gender imbalance. The car industry still has a long, long way to go; only one person in our top 10 is a woman, and she's a politician, not an industry leader. There are few females at the top of the Chinese car industry, so our list is unlikely to get more balanced as more Chinese leaders need to be included.

The industry has some brilliant women in CEO roles, including Mary Barra at GM, Linda Jackson at Peugeot and Lynn Calder at Ineos Automotive. But the fortunes of their companies and the real power of an employed CEO keep them out of this list for now.

Same in tech: Tekedra Mawakana at Waymo and Aicha Evans at Zoox, Amazon's self-driving subsidiary, are both brilliant CEOs, but as part of bigger technology groups their personal sway is somewhat limited.

CARRY ON REGARDLESS

Not electric. Not SUVs. Revised versions of BMW, VW and AMG super hatches show the value of expert evolution

Words Ben Barry **Photography** Jordan Butters

Giant test

THE DEFINITIVE VERDICT

Remember the six-cylinder super hatch of the 1990s, when BMW transformed its 3-series into the Compact and VW slotted a VR6 engine into the Golf? The new BMW M135, VW Golf R and – a later addition to the niche – Mercedes-AMG A35 we're pedalling over a damp North York Moors might be those cars' much-altered descendants, but they're no longer the quirky premium curios the 323ti Compact and Golf VR6 once were.

Today they're three of the last petrol hot hatches standing, and they're so similar on paper (if not to drive) that they could've been built to an FIA rulebook. All get transverse 2.0-litre turbo fours with all-wheel drive and a DCT transmission, churn out around 300bhp, sprint from zero to 62mph in under five seconds, officially return mid-30s mpg and cost mid-£40s to £50k.

They're like Group A homologation tributes with a load more posh, and we're driving them over this slick moorland road like we're shaking the final drop of ketchup from the bottle.

The M135's windscreen fills with Golf R as we power into a crest, the snaking road ahead briefly vanishing as the topography ratchets up. Over the Golf goes, its suspension grasping for the ground like a cartoon character's legs spinning mid-air before it lands with gymnastic elasticity.

I don't even think tester Ben Pate – a former chassis engineer, and a friend of *CAR* – lifts the throttle. The R just bites into the surface and slingshots through a sequence of flicks as its torque-vectoring tech gets to work.

A beat later and the M135 flares into torque steer as its nose lightens and excess power bleeds away through its front tyres. When it compresses on its suspension, I floor the throttle and the BMW sweeps hungrily into the apex, its all-wheel drive working all four contact patches equally hard.

Piers Ward is rear gunner in the Merc, locked on like he has missile launchers for paddleshifts. Every glance I steal in the BMW's rearview mirror, there's a glinty stare looking back at me and a basking-shark gob threatening to swallow me whole (the Merc looks pretty angry too).

The F70 (fourth-generation) 1-series I'm driving is the freshest car here by a whisker. Five years since its predecessor abandoned the rear-drive six-cylinder USP, the new M135 has been updated as part of an unusually comprehensive facelift for BMW's 1-series generally – its 'i' suffix needlessly stolen by Munich's electrification department despite being as BMW as kidneys and kinks (also note the font used for '35' is now smaller than the '1', possibly suggesting other M1 variants might follow).

The body is 42mm longer and – far less common for a facelift – height increases by 25mm, plus there's a lower front end, reworked kidney grilles and fresh LED headlights. It all looks a little bulbous, like David Attenborough should be narrating your inspection of it.

You drop reasonably low down into comfortable, figure-hugging bucket seats in an all-new cabin with a premium, angular sort of architecture crowned by BMW's dash-spanning Curved Display. Overall it looks good, though some prominent plastics feel hard and sound hollow when you tap them, and the previous model's rotary iDrive controller is gone – the touchscreen, voice activation and a multi-function steering wheel are now your options for controlling the infotainment.

The BMW is not particularly spacious in the back for a transverse C-segment hatch. A high seat, low roof with scalloped headlining and constrictive front seatbacks all wind me into a hunch like a mollusc recoiling into a shell. At least the boot's the biggest on test, if only marginally so at 380 litres.

For all that's new, the M135 continues to be based on the UKL2 platform shared with the previous-generation Mini Countryman and Clubman. BMW claims 'significantly enhanced performance characteristics', which is strange given power actually falls by 6bhp to 296bhp, torque by 37lb ft to 295lb ft. Blame those increasingly stringent emissions regulations, and not having the mild-hybrid tech fitted to BMW's new 120-not-i.

To be fair the BMW's still a perky little thing to hustle, with a swell of midrange torque and snappy gearshifts courtesy of a new seven-speed dual-clutch 'box that supersedes the previous generation's eight-speed automatic. But while turbo lag doesn't exactly jump out at you, it has more lag than the other cars on test, plus the M's burbly soundtrack is so synthesised I half expect a 'bossa nova' demo mode (actually I'd prefer one over the batshit 'digital art' offered in the same sub-menu as the actual driving modes).

Despite the power shortfall, other stuff does a load of dynamic heavy lifting for the BMW, including a stiffer body structure and significantly revised suspension, which includes 'highly preloaded' mounts for the anti-roll bars, 20 per cent more caster and new M adaptive suspension. ▶

WE'RE DRIVING LIKE WE'RE SHAKING THE FINAL DROP OF KETCHUP FROM THE BOTTLE

KN71 NWA
KY74 DFV

Normal enough to the untrained eye, but we know better

North Yorkshire offers fine views, but it's playing hard to get today

Roads worth driving a long way for, and largely empty

On the way up here I'd tossed the BMW about and enjoyed its fleet-footedness and the directness of its steering, though a slightly sleepy spot at top dead centre disguises its absolute urgency beyond that, and the helm generally has a thick-set, highly isolated sort of chunkiness to it.

The body is nicely locked down, and the traction feels very much four-square if you work the chassis hard, but the M135 also combines that authority with a playful edge. Even on the lockstops it exudes a very rounded, rubbery feel as the front bites and the rear pivots, like it's fooling about in a wet suit and flippers. The BMW also does that torque-steery thing when its nose goes light, as though xDrive isn't chucking power rearwards quickly enough.

While the M135 is the most affordable hatch here at £43,000, it's actually the most expensive in tested form thanks to £11k of optional extras. Much is consumed by the Technology pack (£2750), M Sport Pro package (£2075) and 'frozen' paint (£2100), but key to the drive are M Sport seats, 19-inch alloys (18s are standard) and to a lesser extent the panoramic roof, given it puts a few extra kilos in the wrong place. BMW also offers an M Dynamic pack (not fitted to this early car). For £3k it adds drilled brakes, lighter wheels, stickier tyres and a track-optimised chassis, all of which should sharpen the M135's claws.

The prospect of a stiffer ride is a little worrying, because I'd driven up here perplexed by the BMW's highly reactive and tightly coiled suspension, which refused to settle when I pushed on over a boggier landscape with tricky primary undulations.

When Ben P jumped in and described it as plush and Piers decreed it absolutely fine, I started to wobble like a witness under cross-examination, only to discover the M135 runs M Adaptive suspension as standard. This adjusts damping on the fly in response to driving conditions and driving style, so if you chase the performance on a tricky surface it tenses like a body-builder flex. The more committed your driving style, the worse it becomes.

'The primary rate change of acceleration can be violent, but at other times there's a plushness to the chassis,' comments Ben P. 'It's a bit of a lottery what sort of ride you end up with but I do think the base tune is far too stiff for Britain.'

Recently refreshed in Mk8.5 guise, the Golf R is only a little pricier than the M135 at £43,895 but this Black Edition variant creeps up to £45,785 and includes the R Performance package that increases top speed to 168mph, adds the larger rear spoiler and introduces Drift and Special driving modes, the latter optimised for the Nürburgring.

To this Volkswagen UK has added almost £7000 of options. Much is accounted for by a panoramic roof (£1250), Akropovic titanium back box (£3395) and – most important to the drive – adaptive dampers (£735).

Meaner looking headlights and an illuminated badge are the most obvious of the restrained exterior updates, but the looks weren't the most troubling thing about the pre-facelift car, which drove like it was self-medicating and had infotainment that could've been conceived by Uber-hailing hipsters in a Berlin basement.

Thankfully all of this has been drastically improved with the update, including a much more intuitive if still imperfect MIB4 infotainment system. They've even made the temperature and volume sliders illuminated, so you can actually see them at night (though I struggle to find the windscreen demister when poking about at a standstill).

You still drop down low into the Golf's pleasingly squidgy and highly supportive fabric sports seats, grip a thin, firm steering wheel and survey a nicely laid-out cabin architecture. The BMW and Mercedes might be better for premium flash, but this is the sportiest, comfiest and just downright best driving position on test. The rear seats are the most accommodating too, although its boot is 30-40 litres smaller than its rivals'.

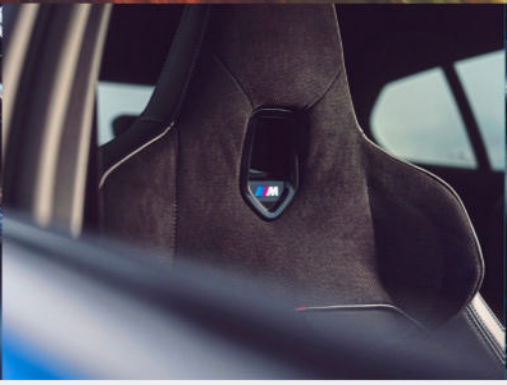
Power of 328bhp with 310lb ft is the most generous here, and on a par with the Golf R 20 Years edition from a couple of years back. Perhaps it's the delivery, perhaps VW is just low-balling, but it feels juicier than that – there's a proper kick here, an up-for-it attitude previously absent, as if the Golf's always ready to step up and deliver more go, even when you're already really on it.

Go looking for lag and you'll find a little delay, but when you're running at speed this motor just always feels hungry – crisp throttle, generous surge of speed and a decisive snap shut when you back off the throttle. It reminds me of that 'pop' when you really connect with a table-tennis ball. It's all extremely incisive, mirroring exactly ▶

THE BMW AND MERCEDES MIGHT BE FLASHIER, BUT THE VW HAS THE BEST DRIVING POSITION ON TEST

VW pipes look the part but don't quite sound it

They've been evolving for decades; enjoy!



7.5 °C
nürburgring
Sport
Race
Drift
Special
Individual
A/C
AUTO
CLIMA
20.0

Suspension won't like that. In fact, it doesn't like anything

THE GOLF R REMAINS A PLIANT, COMFORTABLE CAR BUT NOW WITH WELCOME EXTRA FIZZ

what you tell it to do. The soundtrack is perhaps still quite mild-mannered given this one sings through the Akropovic rear silencer, and the DCT gearchanges are less of an event than shifts in the other cars, but it all sounds and feels more authentic than the BMW and AMG, and above all gels together very cohesively indeed.

As before, you get variable 4Motion all-wheel drive, torque vectoring to channel torque across the rear axle to the wheel that can best use it, and suspension some 20mm lower than standard, but the driving-dynamics manager now integrates the all-wheel-drive system into its powerful computing (as well as steering, suspension, throttle and so on) and even the Comfort suspension default gets a sportier profile.

It raises expectations that this R has more teeth and heightened response, which is exactly what transpires as I flow it over the moors.

The Golf R remains a pliant, comfortable car but welcome extra fizz now percolates up from ground level, and there's a lovely freeness to this steering – all lightness and accuracy at speed, it's like it's dancing over the landscape, clicking its fingers and pointing at people it fancies as it goes. Doesn't tug about over crests like the BMW either.

While all this enhanced feel can get a tad noisy through the steering wheel, the overwhelming sensation is of a car that allows welcome extra connection to make its way through to the driver without becoming excessively abrasive.

'Ride and handling immediately impresses and the Golf just covers ground with such ease,' notes Ben P. 'There's low isolation, probably from stiff bushes, which means lots of vibration through the body, but the Golf's primary control is very good and its secondary ride isn't too shabby either.'

The chassis is adjustable in that you can tweak the rear out of line and point the nose at the apex with a well timed lift of throttle, though it's perhaps less languid and keener to get itself straight than the others.

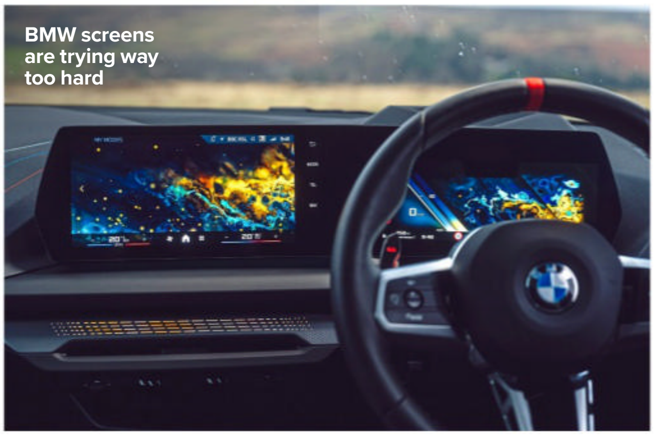
Besides, torque vectoring does a lot to tuck you into the turn, a kind of swinging-round-a-post sensation where the harder you run at a corner and the more you dig into the throttle, the more the Golf sweeps in and powers through. It's a pronounced effect but one you soon dial into, learning to use it as a tool in the Golf's impressive point-to-point armoury.

If you want more flamboyance, there's always Drift mode, which lets you throw shapes by pressing the throttle, not just releasing it, as well as a brilliant warning that goads it 'should only be used by someone with the appropriate driving skills'.

Ben P observes that the VW's DSG transmission can get muddled, especially when overtaking, and it twice refuses to continue in manual mode after spirited blasts. I also get the Golf R's brakes to stink more than the others, which doesn't bode well for track work, but up here running over the moors it's fantastic – especially in its 'Special' Nürburgring setting that unlocks the fluidity of this chassis and directness of its powertrain without harshness. It could've been tuned specifically for a Yorkshire B-road.

Back when BMW and Volkswagen were fitting six-cylinder engines to hatchbacks, Mercedes was preoccupied with trying to stop tippy-toes Mk1 A-Classes toppling over at the sight of deer-based Scandinavian mammals.

Infotainment's no longer a deal breaker



BMW screens are trying way too hard

Merc has the classiest cabin and worst seats

It took until 2013 for the A-Class to sire a hot hatch in the shape of the A45 AMG, which remains the £63k 415bhp halo positioned way beyond even the Golf R or M135. The A35 we're testing slots one rung below with its 302bhp and 295lb ft of torque.

Last updated in mid 2023, the light refresh included a 48-volt mild-hybrid system (13bhp low-speed boost, electrical energy for the ancillaries) and an exterior tickle so gentle I still wonder if Mercedes is pulling our chain.

It also upgraded to the latest MBUX infotainment interface, which (like the BMW) removes the touchpad from the centre console so you now use either the touchscreen, voice or capacitive steering-wheel controls. The latter are so excessively small and unresponsive you might as well be swiping at a smartphone wearing mittens.

Base A35s start from £46,000 with AMG Ride Control adaptive damping, 19-inch alloys and a range of driving modes you can also mix and match in an Individual mode. This one's the range- ▶

Flicks on bumper part of Aero pack

YE74 NJO
M135

Big 1 but no i: pub quiz nerdiness ahoy

IT'S ALMOST AS THOUGH PORSCHE'S GT DEPARTMENT HAS BUILT A HOT HATCH

topping Premium Plus model, which for £51,005 groups a number of options together, including the Aerodynamics package with its lairy rear wing that's balanced by little aero flicks on the front bumper. Nothing else materially affects the drive.

Inside, jet-engine air vents, gloss-black trim, perforated leather and brushed aluminium all add to an upmarket interior ambience superior to the others, though the twin drive-mode dials on the steering wheel look and feel somewhat flaky, and the leather seat facings have a wrinkled texture, like skin under a microscope.

Despite being the longest car on test, the Merc's rear seats are just about okay (tighter than the Golf, better than BMW) but most disappointing are its worst-on-test front seats with their firm bases, lack of lateral support and feeling that they could drop lower still.

But then I fire off down the road and have a proper 'oh hello' kind of epiphany in the Mercedes. There's an unexpected mix of rawness and finesse here, almost as though Porsche's GT department has turned its hand to a hot hatch. At speed it's awesomely stable with a long striding, firm-but-compliant chassis, where road-surface chatter is allowed to percolate up to you, but all the harshness is dexterously rounded off.

The adaptive dampers even work over this tricky landscape in the Sport suspension setting, though that's impossible to isolate from the Sport steering map which oddly lacks the reassuring on-centre connection of Comfort. I settle on Comfort suspension with the Dynamic powertrain in Individual mode and have a heart-pounding drive over these sweeping moorland roads.

Tip the Merc into a corner and there's more roll than you get from the others, especially over its front axle, but it bites convincingly and there's real grit and texture to the way this car connects with the road surface and powers on.

'Ride and handling are almost as good as the Golf's and there's excellent isolation but also significantly more roll angle than the other two, especially over the front axle,' feeds back Ben P. 'That doesn't reduce its overall capability, but the Golf has the steadier, more predictable platform.'

Traction here is as mighty and neutral as in both the others, and while there's no novelty drift assistance here, the Mercedes-AMG's rear end is so easily adjustable simply by lifting the throttle you really don't need one.

The growly powertrain sounds no more authentic than the Hyundai Ioniq 5 N's entirely artificial soundtrack, but this is the most responsive engine on test, the M260 unit having virtually zero turbo lag. That immediacy is compounded by short gearing (this one goes up to eight cogs) and punchy shifts heralded by a kind of *ba-dum* drumroll. Ingot-like paddleshifters that click tightly convey a sense of directness too.

Atrocious road noise on coarser surfaces is the big downside, most of which floods up through the rear arches like someone's going at them with an electric sander, and after longer drives, those firm seats also leave my back aching like crazy.

It's far from a perfect scorecard for the Mercedes-AMG, then, but as a driving tool I reckon it's underrated and does leave us with much to ponder as we head into Pickering for a meal, a pint and a very thorough sense-check of our test notes... ▶

A day to be glad of all-wheel drive, even if you don't need it

VW most powerful and quickest; BMW least costly

FINAL RECKONING

WINNING VIA TINY TWEAKS

The M135 bowled into this test with the hype of the new and a snazzy Frozen Blue paintjob, but it's hard not to feel a little underwhelmed by BMW M's cheapest current model and only hatchback.

To its credit the M135 is the most affordable car on test, comes with a great cabin and infotainment, and is refined at speed. It's also mostly nicely sorted thanks to punchy steering, a solidly connected rear axle that can live with enthusiastic direction changes and composed body control complemented by sure-footed traction. It can be a lot of fun.

But its isolated chassis, aloof steering and the curious adaptive suspension that becomes less compliant the harder you drive – even on terrible surfaces – all help relegate the M135 to the back of the pack.

The Mercedes-AMG A35 is a perhaps surprisingly raw experience given the premium badge, but it's also shot through with real finesse. The powertrain is superb, especially its lack of lag, plus its chassis is rock-solid stable at speed, agile through the fun stuff and sure-footed when you work the all-wheel drive.

Negatives include excess road noise on poor surfaces and seats that are too firm and too unsupportive, but the A35's surprisingly hardcore flavour really endeared it to all three of us.

But neither the Mercedes nor the BMW has an answer for the updated Golf R. On paper the tweaks seem decidedly modest – a much-needed infotainment rethink is first to catch the eye – but in fact the extra performance and additional connection in this chassis really are transformative. You can terrorise the moors in a Golf R like you might in a Subaru Impreza, and there's a flow to a Golf R on a mission that's so much more satisfying than its somewhat distant predecessor. It's a great example of how crucial the last bit of fine tuning really is.

Sealing the deal for the R is the liveability that's defined every Golf – the excellent front seats, the space in the back, the compliant ride and high levels of refinement. And, at last, the infotainment no longer provokes Basil Fawlty outbursts.

This is a very much improved Golf R, then, one that's great to drive flat out, easy to live with day-to-day and the clear winner of this test. **car**

1st

VW GOLF R

Best to drive, easy to live with and much improved. Even the infotainment's better

★★★★☆

2nd

MERCEDES-AMG A35

Gritty feel, compliant chassis and responsive drivetrain. But noisy and uncomfortable

★★★★☆

3rd

BMW M135

Agile, highly capable chassis let down by excess isolation and unyielding suspension

★★★☆☆

Best to drive is also the easiest to live with

VW GOLF R

What's the line-up?
The benchmark all-wheel-drive hot hatch dropped the ball last time out, with a driving experience that failed to sparkle at sensible speeds and infotainment that was infuriating. Now it's back to make amends. It's the most potent in this group. Ours is the Black Edition, in white.

▶ **Data**
Price £45,785 (£52,580 as tested) **Powertrain** 1984cc 16v turbo four-cyl, seven-speed dual-clutch automatic, all-wheel drive **Performance** 328bhp @ 5600rpm, 310lb ft @ 2100rpm, 4.6sec 0-62mph, 168mph **Weight** 1548kg **Efficiency** 34.5mpg (official), 19.8mpg (tested), 417-mile range (claimed), 240 miles (tested), 186g/km CO2

MERCEDES-AMG A35

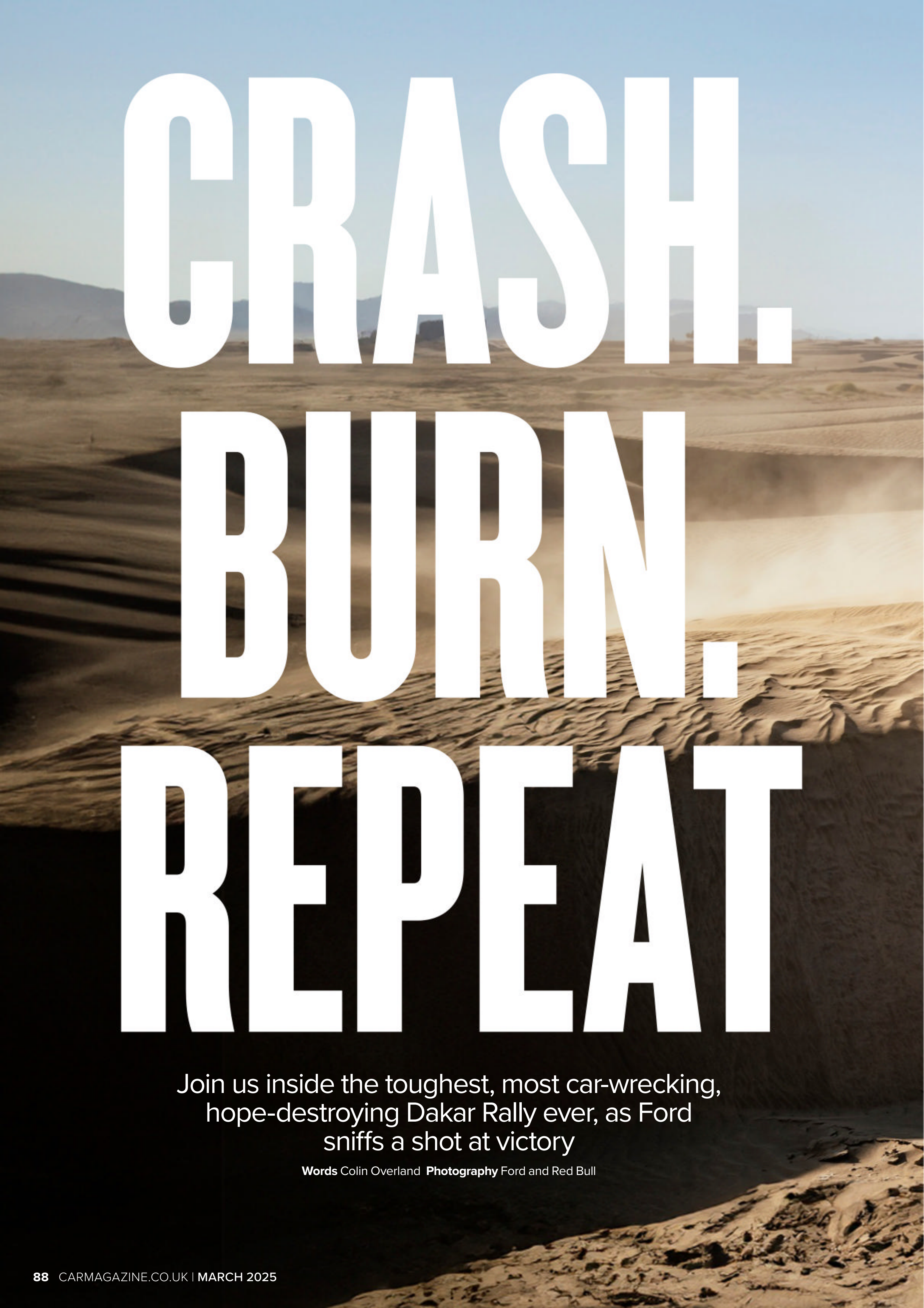
What's the line-up?
The only contender to have a more powerful sibling (the A45), but AMG's A35 is well matched to these rivals on power and price. No changes since 2023 – and even those were superficial – but the A35 could prove to be the dark horse of this test. Ours is in Premium Plus spec.

▶ **Data**
Price £51,005 (£51,630 as tested) **Powertrain** 1991cc 16v turbo four-cyl, eight-speed dual-clutch auto, all-wheel drive **Performance** 302bhp @ 5800rpm, 295lb ft @ 3000rpm, 4.7sec 0-62mph, 156mph **Weight** 1495kg **Efficiency** 32.8-33.2mpg (official), 21.4mpg (tested), 408-mile range (claimed), 263 miles (tested), 195g/km CO2

BMW M135

What's the line-up?
The hottest version of BMW's most affordable car gets dynamic, styling and infotainment tweaks, five years on. But M135 power and torque actually fall a little, leaving the all-wheel-drive chassis to do the heavy lifting. Is it enough to elevate a previous under-achiever?

▶ **Data**
Price £43,000 (£54,050 as tested) **Powertrain** 1998cc 16v turbo four-cyl, seven-speed dual-clutch automatic, all-wheel drive **Performance** 296bhp @ 5750rpm, 295lb ft @ 2000rpm, 4.9sec 0-62mph, 156mph **Weight** 1550kg **Efficiency** 36.7mpg (official), 22.4mpg (tested), 396-mile range (claimed), 241 miles (tested), 173-184g/km CO2



CRASH. BURN. REPEAT

Join us inside the toughest, most car-wrecking, hope-destroying Dakar Rally ever, as Ford sniffs a shot at victory

Words Colin Overland **Photography** Ford and Red Bull

Carlos Sainz, age 62, ready to carry on the fight. But the scrutineers say no

Starting at one-minute intervals helps drivers avoid dust from the car in front

So, Matthew, just how much swearing was there?

Pause.

'Lots. A lot of swearing, from both sides.'

Matthew Wilson, principal of the Ford/M-Sport team at the Dakar Rally, is reliving the moment, just a couple of days into this year's event, when Carlos Sainz, last year's winner, overturned in the desert.

Accidents happen all the time in the 4800-mile, 14-day challenge around Saudi Arabia, and don't have to mean your race is over.

Wilson explains that in the team HQ, there's one satellite phone for each of the four race cars, and it's only for use when something's gone badly wrong. 'When the sat phone rang in the office, we knew it was not good. From the tracking, we knew he'd been stopped for a while, so we knew something was wrong. But when the sat phone rings it confirms it.'

Sainz told the team his Raptor T1+ had overturned, and team-mate Mitch Guthrie stopped to help, attaching a tow rope attached to his Raptor and getting Sainz's car back on its wheels. Recalls Wilson: 'At that point they were inspecting the car and were fairly confident they could carry on – more cosmetic than anything else. They did carry on, with a few dramas along the way – having to remove the windscreen, for one. The job they did was incredible. They were an hour and 15 minutes down, and they managed to get that back to an hour and two minutes. At one point they had a navigation error, purely because they couldn't see: no windscreen, all the dust in the car, they missed the waypoint, so they were searching for the waypoint and the time got back to an hour and 30.

'It just shows what a legend he is: 650km or whatever it was with the car in that state,' says Wilson. Minus most of its bodywork, Sainz's car made it back to the Ford team's base in the bivouac – which relocates every couple of days as the race moves around Saudi – at the end of the two-day Chrono section around Bisha, Chrono being a format that doesn't permit any outside assistance.

'There were scrutineers at the break point in the evening [of the first day of the Chrono], and our thought at that point was that if there was any damage with the rollcage they would have picked that up there and they would probably have stopped him, so we were pretty confident that if he could get the car back here there was nothing we couldn't fix and get the car back out the next day.

'Our philosophy at that point was: look Carlos, you won the Dakar last year by an hour and 20 minutes, and now you're an hour and 30 behind. Maybe the win is out of the question, but for sure the podium isn't. So there was an air of: right, let's get this fixed and let's get back out there. But sadly, when we started to look at the car more closely, and the FIA [safety inspectors from motorsport's governing body] came over, it was pretty clear that we couldn't carry on.

'We stated our case that we could repair the car and it would be as safe if not stronger. But it's very clear, with the way the regulations are written, with certain parts of the safety cage, you can't repair them. They made their decision, and we have to respect that decision. Sadly, that meant that Carlos has gone home.'

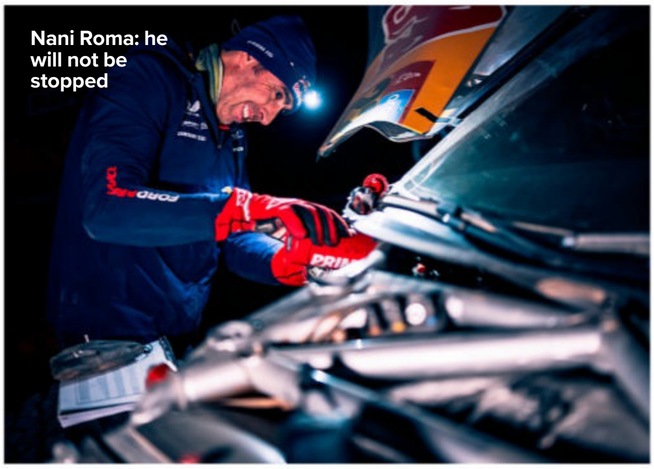
What exactly was the problem? 'There was a bend in one of the top tubes, above the co-driver's side, and further back there was a crack. I'm sure that in the future, knowing what's happened to Sébastien Loeb as well [the Dacia driver, hunting his first Dakar win at the eighth attempt, had a similar race-ending problem], and these were two of the main contenders, that regulation will be revisited in the future. Safety is paramount, so opening a regulation to allow you to repair needs to be worded very, very carefully. But the Dakar spirit is fixing it and carrying on.'

Wilson admits the severity of the terrain took many in the bivouac by surprise. 'The first few days were particularly tough for everybody, and a bit of a shock, because I don't think the Dakar's really been in that area around Bisha very much, and the damage we saw in the first three or four days was immense.' For instance, in months of testing the Raptor T1+, Ford didn't suffer a single broken windscreen; here they lose two in one day.

Fortunately for Ford, Sainz is not the only egg in their basket. The driver line-up also includes Mitch Guthrie, a rising US star who's graduated from the smaller SSV class; Nani Roma, a winner on two wheels and four, who's competed in Dakars in Africa, South ▶

HE'S OUT OF CONTENTION BUT CARRYING ON, BECAUSE HE CAN BE MUCH QUICKER TO THE SCENE OF A TEAM-MATE IN DISTRESS THAN A RESCUE TRUCK

Matthew Wilson, Nanny McPhee of the desert



Nani Roma: he will not be stopped

America and Saudi Arabia, who only missed last year's because he was a bit busy recovering from cancer; and Mattias Ekström, who like Sainz made the leap from Audi's highly advanced range-extender electric RS Q e-Tron to the naturally-aspirated V8 Ford Raptor T1+.

The 46-year-old all-rounder – whose successes have come in rallycross, World Rally, DTM and beyond – doesn't waste words.

So, Mattias, does it feel like you're going to win?

Pause while he continues munching on his salad in the bivouac near Hail, on the rest day after the Marathon stage – like the Chrono, a two-day test where the drivers get minimal assistance.

'In a way, yes. But I felt like this last year as well, and it ended quick. So I decided not to think about the overall, and to take it day by day.

'Last year taught me a lesson. When you start to think too far away, you end up losing the focus on the moment. I think we are in a good place, that we can win, but there are too many days left.'

When we visit the team, Roma is out of contention, having lost too much time in a collision. He's carrying on, though, not just in search of World Rally Raid Championship points for Ford, but also because a team-mate is generally much quicker to the scene of a driver in distress than a rescue truck, as Guthrie demonstrated with Sainz. (A week later, Roma and Ekström will each win a stage, giving Ford a welcome bragging point, and Nasser Al-Attiyah does the same for the Dacia Sandrider. But ultimately, as so often, it's the Toyotas that dominate this Dakar: Saudi privateer Yazeed Al-Rajhi wins the event from factory driver Henk Lategan.)

Guthrie is heading for a top-five finish, and is delighted to report that aside from punctures – everyone gets punctures – his Ford has given him zero problems. This is remarkable. The Dakar is so ▶

Ekström's fifth Dakar, and his best by miles

Sandrider by name... you get the idea

RIDING WITH AN OFF-ROAD GOD

Want to ride in the nearest thing currently available to the Raptor T1+, the Bronco DR? Of course you do. It's an off-the-shelf desert racer, yours for $300k or so, built for Ford by Multimatic.

It has the same 5.0-litre V8 Coyote engine as the T1+, but about 50bhp more than the 359bhp limit imposed on the T1+ by Dakar rules. It has the same 17-inch wheels and 37-inch BF Goodrich tyres, but different gearing and braking. And it has no windshield, because they don't believe in them in US desert racing.

My driver is Brad Lovell, a legend in US desert-race circles, who helped develop the car. When he takes *CAR* on a four-mile loop through the desert near Hail, he's not hanging around. Through soft sand, over hard sand, crawling up rocky escarpments, drifting spectacularly – he makes the car dance. It also sounds glorious.

How much of this high-speed, multi-surface precision is down to the car and how much is because of the driver, who knows? But regular humans can't do this.

I know this because on similar terrain I drive a Bronco Raptor: that's at the hot end of the road-legal Bronco line-up, running a 3.5-litre twin-turbo V6 that also makes more than 400bhp. It's clearly highly capable, coping with forbidding climbs and skipping over ruts. It's responsive, agile and reassuring. And it looks great.

Although many 4x4s are bought for reasons for image and style, Ford insists that its Dakar programme will bring technological crossover to production cars, especially in the suspension and driving modes – Normal, Off-Road, Baja and Rock Crawl, for instance, which make a difference to gearing, steering, suspension and sound.

Even in the UK, which has nothing to compare to the Dakar, expect to see more of the Raptor name, currently found only on the top version of the Ranger. It's a key part of one of Ford boss Jim Farley's aims for the company: to 'own' off-road.

BALADI
express
QATAR AIRWAYS
Red Bull

Gutiérrez, Al-Attiyah and their co-drivers combining forces

'Desert' includes a big variety of terrain, all of it challenging

Seb Loeb remains the best driver never to have won the Dakar

Raptor T1+ sounds amazing, its V8 in contrast to last year's winning Audi tough on a vehicle that you have to assume something will go wrong, especially when the vehicle is as new as the Raptor T1+: design started only two years ago, and it first turned a wheel last April. Nobody wins the Dakar with a new car in its first year.

Guthrie has adapted astonishingly well to the leap from SSV to the top class, where everything happens much faster. He has surprised and impressed everybody we talk to, as has Dacia's Cristina Gutiérrez, who made a similar step up, and Toyota's Toby Price, who stepped sideways from motorcycles, co-driven by Sam Sunderland, another two-time Dakar motorcycle winner.

And a huge amount of credit must go to the M-Sport/Ford Anglo-American operation that created the car out of thin air and got it competitive so quickly. This is only Ford's second Dakar, after a dummy run in a V6-engined car last year, although the campaign builds on decades of desert-race experience in the US. Combine that with M-Sport's expertise in WRC, and you have a mass of know-how and a can-do attitude worthy of Bob the Builder.

'You never get it right first time,' says Wilson. 'I'd be too big headed to sit here and say we got it bang-on first time. But the exercise we did last year, where we could come with a vehicle that already existed, we learned operationally, logistically, the strategy side, that was invaluable. That's allowed us to come this year and be a lot more on it: the right structure, the equipment, all the little things.'

Everything is planned meticulously, but what makes it such an impressive operation is the rapidity with which the team can react to unexpected events, like Sainz being eliminated. Wilson concedes that even this dark cloud has a silver lining.

'We've spread the load out. But I'd much rather have four cars out there than extra mechanics on three cars. We started with five mechanics on each vehicle: a car chief and then four. What we've now done is we've made that six per car, and a couple of guys floating, including the guy who was Carlos's chief mechanic. Wherever there's the biggest issue, he will move to that car, and the other guy is basically controlling all the repairs. We've restructured so we've got more resource per car, so hopefully we will work a bit quicker.'

THESE ARE COMPETITIVE PEOPLE, AND A LITTLE UNHINGED, GIVEN THE DAKAR RALLY'S PLENTIFUL OPPORTUNITIES TO EAT DUST AND SMASH ROCKS

Drivers sleep in motorhomes, crew in rooftop tents

Camels are everywhere in Saudi, mostly doing nothing

Watching the mechanics at work, servicing Roma's brakes, washing the bodywork, replacing some scuffed stickers, is a masterclass in quiet efficiency. It's all done with great care and attention, and they never need to refer to a manual to check the torque settings or tyre pressures: they know it all by heart.

There's very little banter or 'pass the spanner' chat, just a gentle warning 'going down' when the car's being lowered on the jack.

The wellbeing of all these people is another of Wilson's responsibilities. 'They call me the bedtime police. As well as the cars and drivers, you've really got to look after the team. Tomorrow, for instance, we've got to move 550km, move the bivouac [to Al Duwadimi]. If we've got a late night tonight, I'll make sure that somebody in every vehicle goes to bed early and they will drive. By week two, small things make a big difference.

'We didn't want tents on the ground, so pretty much everybody is in a roof tent. That came from us visiting here two years ago and seeing how much rain there was, the quagmire that the bivouac was, water running through people's tents.

'You can test as much as you want. But what we found in the first three days here as an actual event, you can never learn from testing. We're now going to do the rest of the championship, two cars only, and we will be trying to rotate the drivers and keep them all as match fit as possible. They've all done a lot of testing, but you can see as soon as you come to an event the level just goes up.'

It goes without saying that these are competitive people. And clearly a little unhinged, too, given the nature of the Dakar with its plentiful opportunities to eat dust and smash rocks. But there's also a huge team spiritedness, not always evident in some other branches of motorsport, and an awareness of the bigger picture.

Ekström, for instance, may be ultra-competitive, aided by co-driver Emil Bergkvist, but knows occasionally things just don't go your way, and there's nothing to be gained by playing the blame game.

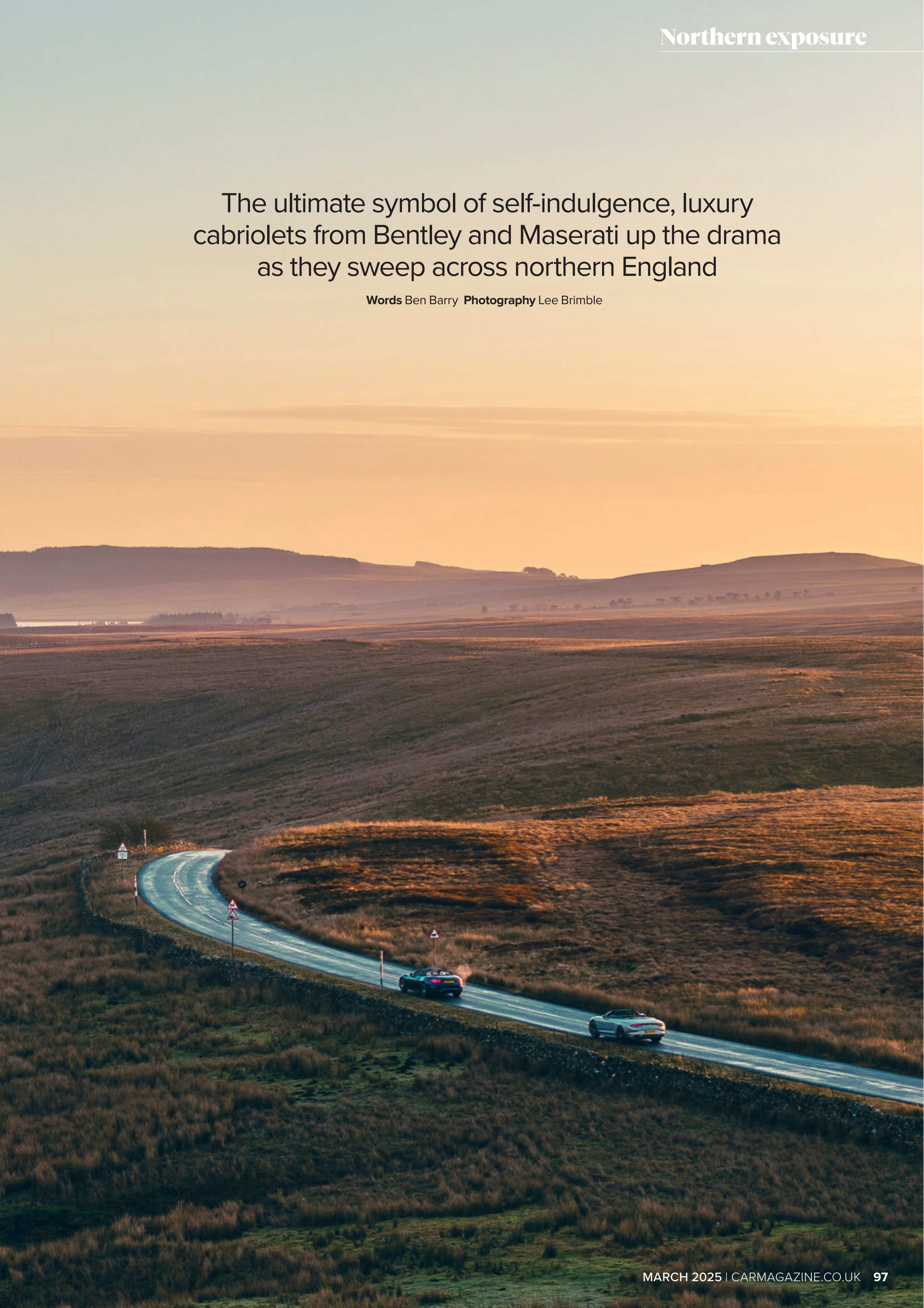
'Sometimes you get brain failure – he says left, you turn right. You do mistakes all the time – it's just the size of them. You do constant wrong decisions, and constant right decisions. There are so many options – that line or that line. It's frustrating at times, but you need to forget history and move on. You won't get that time back anyway.'

Meanwhile Roma, who really has been everywhere and done everything, says he's much happier racing in the Dakar's current Saudi incarnation than the original African location that gave the event its name. There, he says, you see so many people who are extremely poor and too weak to do much about it that you wonder what you're playing at, crashing through their neighbourhood in a storm of dust and thunder. He's recovered from cancer and returned to a way of life he loves. Not everybody is so fortunate.

Pause.

He says: 'You realise how lucky you are to live the life you live.'

OPEN-AIR THEATRE



The ultimate symbol of self-indulgence, luxury cabriolets from Bentley and Maserati up the drama as they sweep across northern England

Words Ben Barry **Photography** Lee Brimble

Damp winter roads no match for the all-wheel-drive systems

Heater working overtime to keep the goose bumps at bay

This isn't Beatrix Potter's Cumbria of woodland paths, chatty rabbits and tourist coaches grinding by like plate tectonics. We're exploring the county's harder, more remote north-eastern corner, where peaty moors devour men whole if they stop to take in the view, and where a typical two-vehicle combination would be a quad bike and a battle-scarred old Land Rover Defender.

The Bentley Continental GTC Speed and Maserati GranCabrio Trofeo might be conspicuously out of context in these wilds, but each has its own unique take on the hedonistic indulgence of the luxury convertible, and both feel utterly majestic.

Pre-dawn, the Bentley storms over this epic rolling landscape, exhaling into compressions on its plush air suspension before powering on as if squeezed from giant bellows.

The Maserati's up ahead and courses over the wriggling tarmac like a horny salmon up a beck. It too rides on air springs and strides with the undulations, but its chassis is perkier by a margin, the power delivery more flamboyantly peaky as it surges on a wave of boost.

Such is the dynamic challenge here that both sometimes run out of compression support and kiss the surface with a hi-hat *tishhhh*.

We push deeper into the middle of nowhere, roofs down, seats, neck warmers and steering wheels set to toasty, the sharp tang of screenwash wafting through chill cabins as Pirellis slip over roads smeared with salt and grime.

For such conceptually similar machines – both are front-engined, all-wheel-drive, four-seat droptops from prestige makers with over 100 years of heritage – their execution could barely be more different.

Assembled just a few hours away in Crewe and released with its coupe sibling back in June, the new Conti's pretty much on home turf, strutting around in low-single-digit temperatures with its top off as though it's the height of summer.

Like the previous model, this fourth generation is based on the MSB platform shared with the Porsche Panamera and appears very much evolutionary. Bentley, however, assures us 68 per cent of parts are new, the most obvious visual clue being single headlamps that nod to the S2 of 1959.

More significant is the Ultra Performance Hybrid powertrain. The *only* choice if you want a Conti, it replaces the recently discontinued W12 and adds 188bhp/332lb ft of electric thrust and a 25.9kWh battery to the previous 'entry-level' twin-turbocharged 4.0-litre V8.

On paper, it's almost all wins. An output of 771bhp makes a healthy leap over even the venerable W12 (739bhp in the ultra-rare Batur form), but economy shoots up from the Batur's 20mpg to 26.6mpg and you can officially waft at up to 87mph and for as far as 50 miles totally emissions free.

Electrification is largely responsible for making this V8 over 400kg portlier than the Batur W12 (2636kg!) but throttle response is lag-free, the rich, bassy soundtrack is Bentley through and through, and this is tidal, gravitational performance of such magnitude I'd swear it makes the world rotate more swiftly. W12? Forgotten in the time it takes to reach 5000rpm.

Cost you, though. The Bentley bases from £259,500, with our ▶

example bumped to £311,455 mostly thanks to Extreme Silver paint (£9085) and its First Edition specification (£31,430). The latter includes massage seats, an infotainment screen that twizzles like a pig on a spit and some driver-assist tech you might assume was standard.

It makes the new Maserati look a snip at £169,585, with our test car tickled to £187,435 mostly thanks to £6960 of driver-assist gizmos and £3360 of Sonus 16-speaker hi-fi.

Design might again be distinctly evolutionary, but that rather underplays the fact Maserati has invested in a clean-sheet approach for its GranTurismo coupe and GranCabrio twins – probably for the best given the previous-generation convertible lived almost a decade and ended production in 2019.

Besides, offering a choice of a full electric version (the Folgore) or the entirely petrol Trofeo on one platform with only relatively minor changes necessitated a fresh architecture, the resulting head-scratching yielding a new body wrought predominantly from aluminium.

We're driving the Trofeo, which combines Maserati's Nettuno 3.0-litre twin-turbo V6 with an eight-speed auto gearbox and all-wheel drive. It's a nicely balanced package, with the engine pushed far back in the nose and a front differential positioned so the wet-sumped engine can drop as low as possible, even if there's no transaxle here.

It's rapid too. The Nettuno's 542bhp and 480lb ft might fall way short of the Bentley's headlines, but so does its 1895kg kerbweight, meaning it loses out by just 6bhp in the power-to-weight stakes. (At 100kg heavier than the GranTurismo, it also carries far less of a penalty over its coupe sibling than the Bentley.)

On the road, the Maserati compounds that advantage by feeling far fleeter than its chunky kerbweight suggests, thanks to snappy steering, sparky surges of performance and gearshifts like hand claps. The umbilical cord of Ferrari might have long been cut since the last model with its Maranello-made V8, but that alacrity lives on.

Top-down driving not entirely normal at this time of year in this part of the world

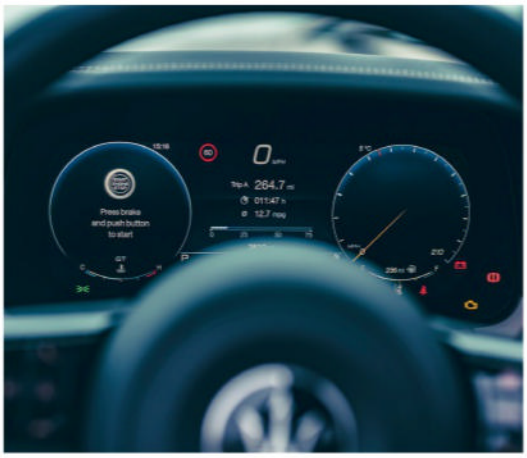
> **On the road, the Maserati compounds its advantage by feeling far fleeter than its kerbweight suggests thanks to gearshifts like hand claps**

The evening before, I take the Bentley north from *CAR*'s East Midlands base to meet the others in Catterick, North Yorkshire, easing down into an imperious kind of sports command driving position on indulgently comfortable chairs.

Much impresses in this sumptuous cabin, including gorgeously supple 'Brunel' leather and glossy carbonfibre trim, but quality falters here and there, most visibly with a bank of plastic switches in the centre console – I've used more premium-feeling ATMs. That the infotainment is so obviously lifted from Audi and not in its first flush of youth might also rankle, but it works just fine.

Leave the GTC in Comfort or 'B' for Bentley mode and – provided the battery is sufficiently topped – you slip away serenely, a perfect match for the glide of two-chamber air springs and dual-valve dampers. I manage 39 miles at an average of 64mph in zero-emissions mode, delighted to carbon-offset our impending profligacy.

Switch to Sport and the V8 fires with a distant thud, like an explosive detonated underwater. Performance is towering, but it's more satisfying to lean into midrange muscle in manual mode than to let the dual-clutch transmission kick down in a distinctly two-stage ▶



0 mph
Trip A 264.7 mi
011:47 h
12.7 mpg
Press brake and push button to start

BENTLEY
DK74 RVF

Bentley has more power but is only just quicker to 62mph process and send revs sky high.

With massage seats working my back like a rolling pin eased over dough, this is a soothing way to while away the evening journey to Catterick, even if the seven-bow insulated hood could be quieter still.

Next morning I swap into the Maserati. Parked under street lighting it looks gorgeous, its low, pouty nose and long bonnet flowing into seductive curves. Like the Bentley, its hood preserves the coupe's taut silhouette when raised, and adds welcome 'off-the-shoulder' appeal when stowed.

Climb in and the cockpit immediately sets the tone for a more sporting experience, with seats that drop lower and have firmer bases, and a cabin that's less plush in feel and materials but which envelops its driver in a more purposeful manner than the Bentley.

Most redolent of Ferrari are large aluminium shift paddles fixed to the steering column, and a rotary drive-mode controller positioned at four o'clock on the steering wheel – without glancing from the road you can scroll through Comfort, GT, Sport and Corsa settings, and independently adjust suspension stiffness with a press.

Infotainment is somewhat less intuitive, with everything from stability control to roof operation condensed on a lower screen as busy as a Monopoly board, while the upper screen is a reach away, clearly configured for left-hand drive and often hard to fathom on the move.

The GranCabrio starts with a gruffness quite distinct from both the buttery Bentley and the trumpet fanfare of its predecessor's V8, then short-shifts up the 'box as quickly as possible when left in gentler Comfort and GT modes. Around town this makes revs fall to 1500rpm and powertrain vibrations fizz through the structure.

There's also more road noise in the Maserati, and its secondary ride is pretty excitable too. The Maser's roof drops faster, though, requiring just 14 seconds at up to 32mph (the Bentley requires 19 seconds up to 30mph) and better damps down noise at higher speeds, plus there's actually more space in its rear seats.

Both have boots so tiny it's best to pack light and swallow those room-service laundry charges. (The Bentley's is compromised by the hybrid battery and mostly filled by its charging cable.)

We thread north and then west onto the A66 in darkness, our adaptive LED headlights picking out snow poles at the roadside and dimming around lorries taking a battering in this windswept buzz-cut of a landscape. ▶

The GranCabrio starts with a gruffness distinct from both the buttery Bentley and the trumpet fanfare of the predecessor's V8

Just because it's a cabrio doesn't mean it lacks attitude

Maserati
GC06 MAS
GranCabrio

CAR AT ITS ROOFLESS BEST

Four cars and three unique experiences celebrating the variety and joy of open-top driving

HAPPY VALLEY

This ticked every cliche. Late summer sun dappled across the hills of northern Italy; V6 engines reverberating off rock faces as the scenery swept past, the sound waves trying to escape and simply being flung up and over into the cabin of each car, a glorious cacophony of echoes. The Ferrari 296 GTS sometimes broke the flow by dropping into stealth hybrid mode while the Maserati MC20 Cielo never bothered, all old-school V6 and fluoro paint. My abiding memory is the contrast between the two, of the Maserati's pugil stick to the Ferrari's scalpel. Crucially, though, the Cielo is a redemption for Maserati, a car that can take on one of Maranello's finest. Italy has never felt so joyous. **PW**

ARCTIC BENTLEY

When Bentley gave us a £225,000 Azure for a week, we decided to do something more heroic in it than the sheikhs and superannuated Hollywood producers who would buy one might attempt. We thought that the best thing you could look at through its open roof was the Northern Lights, so we got the boat to Bergen in Norway and drove north of the Arctic Circle for three days and 1300 miles, mostly on sheet ice, to find them. We did, but the raw clarity of the Arctic atmosphere and the indescribable beauty of the landscape were just as rewarding. Somehow the Bentley's 5.5 metres of hand-tooled coachwork survived unscathed, and we doubt another has been back since. **BO**

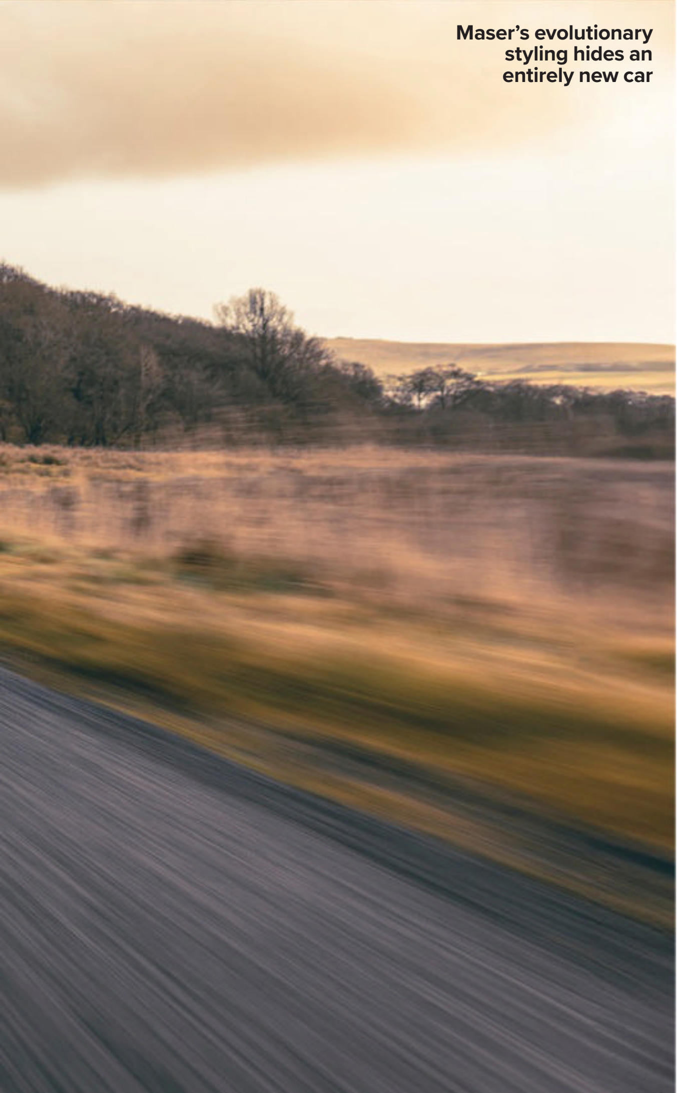
GIMME SHELTER

Covid, October 2020, exploring the Scottish borders in a Ferrari 812 GTS. We'd glamped near Kielder Forest the night before, setting off pre-dawn in a Dark Sky Park with the GTS roof motoring through 180° and quietly disappearing behind us. Overhead, the sky sparkled like jewels on black velvet as the Ferrari's full beam guided us through coiling forest roads.

The fury and noise of the 789bhp V12 as it raced towards 8900rpm is still with me – the orchestral finesse of a soundscape that morphed from burbling bass to shriller brass, the seemingly endless appetite for revs and – most of all – *that* yelp when the rear tyres finally relinquished grip. Trip of a lifetime. **BB**

GC06 MAS

Northern mud is like a cheap version of F1's fluoro aero paint



Maser's evolutionary styling hides an entirely new car

I switch the Maserati to Sport mode, swapping from the more muted Comfort and GT calibrations to bring more pep to the throttle and extra pop to the gearshifts. When I soften its damping, the GranCabrio's abundant energy is complemented by some proper gran-turismo chops. Lovely. But it's on minor roads further north, where Cumbria butts heads with County Durham, that the Italian car's strengths come into focus.

Steering response ramps up immediately off-centre, the front end both sweeps in quickly and bites cleanly, and the brake pedal is drawn tight for heightened response. Perhaps most impressive is just how well the rear axle copes with the punchy direction changes, settling in one solid movement where similarly speedy reactions can upset a less well sorted chassis.

That the Maserati feels the wieldier, more compact machine on test despite being longer and only a fraction narrower is surely some kind of Modenese witchcraft.

Like the Bentley, the Maserati is most satisfying when worked in the meat of its midrange, but it's less linear, with more of a burst of energy that adds a sense of abundant speed and heightens the perception of lightness.

We thread north, our adaptive LED headlights picking out snow poles at the roadside and dimming around lorries taking a battering in the wind

There is, however, a brief pause as the turbochargers hit snooze, and a bagginess to the delivery despite otherwise sparky responses that I can't quite put my finger on at first. Then one of the other testers nails it: 'Heavy flywheel: makes it feel like the engine's running on after you back off.'

As the road writhes along a valley, so the long primary strides of the Maserati's Comfort suspension start to become a little loose. Sport quells the unwanted motion, firming the dampers and slightly lowering the ride height, and the Maser starts to move as a single piece. Even a quick sequence of direction changes can't flummox it.

Maybe it's the slinky look, the heritage or simply how fluidly it drives, but I keep forgetting the GranCabrio sends power to both ▶

GC06 MAS
DK74 RVF

axles, meaning I baby it with more tentative throttle squeezes. Yet driven with the abandon of an unbranded courier van it is amazingly capable point-to-point, combining pronounced rear bias with trustworthy traction that can be teased out of shape if you sweet-talk it.

The Bentley always feels more imperious, but it can certainly step up when you push it harder over demanding roads. Compared with the last W12 Conti I drove back in 2019 there's, well, no comparison, but Bentley added even more rear bias and rear-wheel steering to that car for 2021, and the new model builds on those foundations with a lighter V8 over the nose and lithium-ion ballast in the tail.

Extra weight is never good, but in this case it does endow a front-engined GT with a rear-biased weight distribution for the first time in Conti history, if by a whisker at 49:51.

The steering is nicely weighted, far more responsive and keener to turn than the rather sleepy previous set-up of that 2019 W12, while rear-steer introduces a level of agility that's hard to square with the stately dimensions, plus the body control is unflappable.

In fact, it's the body control and compliance that make this car so capable point-to-point, thanks to its air springs and adaptive dampers, yes, but also active roll control that helps keep all four tyres' contact patches in touch with the ground and quells weight transfer. It is remarkably composed for a heavy car, even when tossed about.

The most aggressive suspension setting is usable on the road, too, though up here the compliance of 'B' for Bentley mode works best.

But dig deeper into its talents and the chassis is surprisingly malleable, with the powertrain's outrageous muscle and instant response letting you squeeze it into all sorts of shapes. Let loose and it rips like a Bullingdon Club riot.

Only the brakes come in for criticism, as even with 10-piston front calipers, stopping power could be better. Plus the way the pedal pre-emptively sucks itself away from your foot in certain situations is a tad unsettling.

We climb up to the roof of the Pennines at dusk, before pulling over to survey a landscape crumpled like folds of flesh and largely unchanged from when Bentley and Maserati first started producing cars over a century ago.

We swap notes and pick favourites, but ultimately it's a little disingenuous to choose a winner from two cars so disparate in execution and so distant in price. The Bentley puts its focus firmly on all-round refinement with a surprising side of driver involvement, where the Maserati has a distinctly more sporting focus. As a daily driver the Bentley is best. For a great road I'd jump in the Maser.

Such ostentatious convertibles might be entirely out of kilter with the ruggedness of this corner of England, but prove to be enjoyable and surprisingly capable ways of exploring it all the same. **car**

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GTC SPEED

PRICE £259,500 (£311,455 as tested)
POWERTRAIN 25.9kWh lithium-ion battery, 3996cc 32v twin-turbocharged V8, eight-speed dual-clutch automatic, all-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 771bhp, 738lb ft (engine: 591bhp @ 6000rpm, 590lb ft @ 2000rpm), 3.4sec 0-62mph, 177mph
WEIGHT 2636kg
EFFICIENCY 26.6mpg (official), 15.1mpg (tested), 31g/km CO2
ON SALE Now
★★★★☆

In theory very similar. In reality poles apart

FIRST EDITION

MASERATI GRANCABRIO TROFEO

PRICE £169,585 (£187,435 as tested)
POWERTRAIN 2992cc 24v twin turbocharged V6, eight-speed automatic, all-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 542bhp @ 6500rpm, 480lb ft @ 3000rpm, 3.6sec 0-62mph, 196mph
WEIGHT 1895kg
EFFICIENCY 26.9-27.1mpg (official), 13.0mpg (tested), 236-238g/km CO2
ON SALE Now
★★★★☆

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Our cars

HELLO MAZDA MX-30 + GOODBYE PEUGEOT E-2008 + WE GET THE FULL BYD DEALER EXPERIENCE

E-motor drives the wheels; rotary motor tops up the battery

Toby Cornelius

MAZDA MX-30 **MONTH 1**

Revved up

Mazda's back to its weird ways with its first rotary in years, attached to a non-weird crossover EV. By **Mark Walton**

The story so far

We put Mazda's weird rotary-engined EV to the test – and hopefully put range anxiety to bed

+ No more charging frustrations – just head to the petrol station!

- Is it too complicated for too complicated's sake?

Logbook

Price £33,495 (£35,295 as tested) **Performance** 17.8kWh battery, electric motor plus 830cc rotary range extender, 168bhp, 9.1sec 0-62mph, 87mph **Range** 53 miles electric (official), 400 miles with range extender (claimed) **Efficiency** 37.2mpg (official), 28.0mpg (tested), 21g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 22.8p per mile **Miles this month** 694 **Total miles** 4072

What a weird car. And yes, I mean that in a good way. These days, when we're surrounded by lookalike SUVs and Chinese electric cars so vanilla they're an insult to custard, it's refreshing to drive something that wilfully swerves left.

Mazda (which is 68 per cent owned by Mazda, giving it more freedom than most) seems to answer to no one in its product line-up, and while the MX-5 remains the jewel in the crown, this MX-30 is surely the car that says the most about the company's obstinate independence.

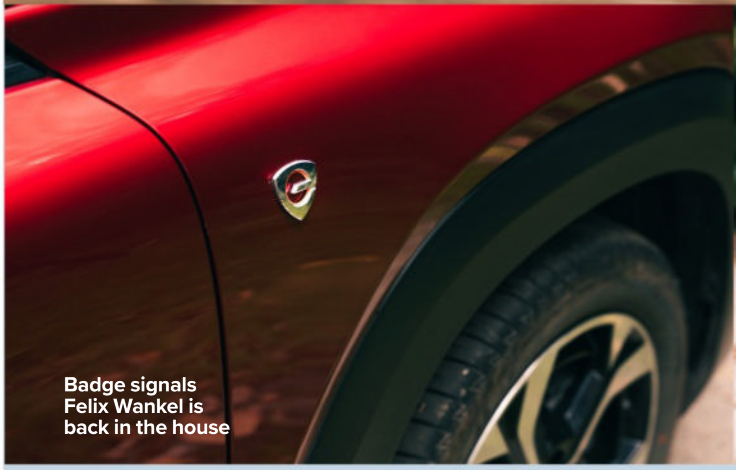
Were any corporate bean-counters involved in the MX-30's conception? Any focus groups? I mean, who else would build a hatchback-coupe-SUV-thingy with a battery and electric motor plus a rotary-engined range extender? A car with pillarless doors and an interior trimmed with cork? Answer me! Who?? WHO!!??

Look at it. Head on, the nose has the familiar Mazda face with those hard-stare headlights. But as you come around the flank the roofline becomes strangely bulbous towards the rear. And there's its posture on the road – it's not a 4x4 but it echoes SUV-crossover-ish styling with those big black wheelarches and the high-waisted glasshouse. And the crazy doors, that open like the flaps of a cardboard box to reveal a coupe interior with that crazy cork detailing. Madness.

The MX-30 is available as a regular plug-in EV, with a 35.5kWh battery and a range of 124 miles, or there's our version, the R-EV, which has a smaller 17.8kWh battery and a reduced EV range of just 53 miles. However, it's fitted with an 830cc rotary engine that acts as a range extender. That means the petrol engine never directly powers the wheels; it just runs an on-board generator that recharges the battery as you drive along. By continually charging the battery, a full tank of fuel gives it a theoretical range of over 400 miles.

Being able to boost your electricity supply as you drive also means the R-EV can juice up a more powerful e-motor than the straight EV, so the R-EV produces 168bhp versus 143bhp in the battery-only version.

While it's a complex car ▶



Badge signals Felix Wankel is back in the house

> **The whole thing is a curiosity, and there's so much to say about it that I feel a little overwhelmed**

under the skin, choosing the spec of your MX-30 R-EV is very straightforward. There are three trim levels available: Prime, Exclusive and Makoto. Our example is a mid-level Exclusive, which means a starting price of £33,495 and loads of standard equipment, including 18-inch alloys, sat-nav, climate control, a head-up display and electric front seats.

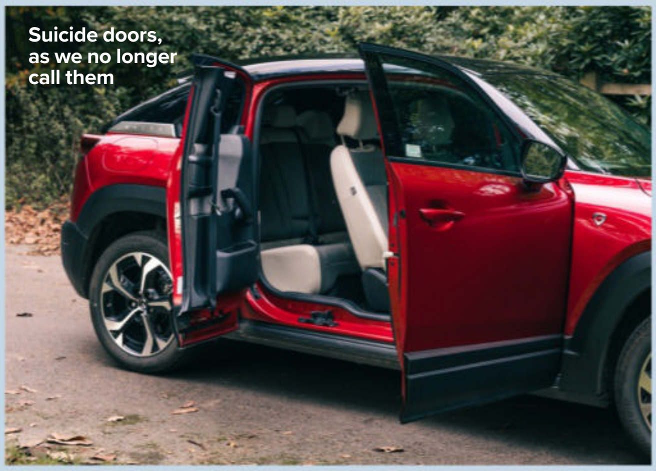
The only option fitted to our car is the split paint finish, Soul Red Crystal with a black roof, which adds £1800. Inside, it has the standard light grey cloth with stone leatherette and heated seats. After that, your configurator options are just tinsel, like illuminated scuff plates and a boot liner, none of which is fitted to our car.

Altogether our rotary-engined MX-30 R-EV stands at £35,295, compared to £31,495 for the equivalent spec in the battery-only car.

Mazda, of course, has a long history with rotary engines, having built its first way back in 1967 (the Cosmo). Its last was the RX-8 (which also featured pillarless 'suicide' doors, remember). That went out of production back in 2012, so it's been a while since Mazda offered a rotary in its line-up.

This new motor is all new: called the 8C, it's the smallest-capacity rotary engine ever to appear in a Mazda production car and also the first to use direct injection, improving efficiency. It produces 74bhp at 4500rpm – though of course you never actually see any of that horsepower, as the engine is just busy beavering away at keeping the battery charged.

So the whole thing is a curiosity, and there seems so much to say about it – the doors! the drivetrain! the cork! – that I admit I feel a little overwhelmed. Where the hell do I start? It's going to be an interesting (weird) six months.



Suicide doors, as we no longer call them

Chemistry vs winter

We've all become accustomed to electric cars suffering to some extent in winter, right? Chemistry is chemistry, and batteries simply don't perform as well in the cold. It's unavoidable, but it seems the best hedge when the mercury plummets is to have a large enough energy capacity that you don't notice the lower cold-weather range.

We're expecting to get no more than 260 miles between charges at the moment, compared with nearer 300 in the summer, but we can live with that. The rest of the ID. 7's cold-weather gear impresses, not least the clever matrix LED headlamps, which give a very clear view at night, without blinding oncoming drivers.

Also very welcome is rapid warming for all four seats and the ability to heat the cabin remotely via an app.

TIM POLLARD

Volkswagen ID. 7 Pro Match

Month 2

The story so far

The ID. 7 is so easy to live with – and it's winning at winter

+ A capable winter car: pre-heating, seat warming and more

– Range dipping a little – but it's still decent

Logbook

Price £51,550 (£55,270 as tested) **Performance** 77kWh battery, e-motor, 282bhp, 6.5sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Efficiency** 4.7 miles per kWh (official), 3.1 miles (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 8.2p per mile **Miles this month** 839 **Total miles** 4408

Pace, space and grace

A busy month, with the regular local trips punctuated by longer journeys to Oxford, Birmingham, Leicester, Heathrow, Plymouth and Eastbourne. The i5 feels like it was made for these excursions. Its rolling refinement is exceptional, with road rumble and wind rustle all but absent, and flying-carpet ride quality. Add decent lounging space, excellent four-way climate control, sparkling Bowers & Wilkins audio and a vast boot, and you have a consummate family mover.

A few of these trips were undertaken during nasty weather, and the i5 shrugged off the wind, rain and resulting slimy roads with disdain. The only significant downside remains the i5's uncompetitive 220-mile real-world range, when you know Polestars and Porsches can do better.

BEN WHITWORTH

BMW i5 eDrive40 M Sport Pro Touring

Month 5

The story so far

An effortless and refined cruiser

+ Everything required for big distances in comfort…

– …except decent range

Logbook

Price £78,450 (£94,995 as tested) **Performance** 81.2kWh battery, e-motor, 340bhp, 6.1sec 0-62mph, 120mph **Efficiency** 3.7 miles per kWh (official), 2.9 miles per kWh (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 301 miles (official), 270 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 3.0p per mile **Miles this month** 1801 **Total miles** 5608

Digital economy

As a sign of how competitive the supermini market is, it's telling that Suzuki invested in a nine-inch infotainment screen with sat-nav, reversing camera and CarPlay/Android Auto for even the most basic Swifts.

People want this stuff and Suzuki's mostly works fine, although the sub-menus on the central screen can be baffling, and the process for turning off the annoying speed-limit warning bong is convoluted.

When winter arrived, the tyre-pressure warning began to flash and I struggled to re-set it, even after pressing the 'turn off tyre pressure warning' button. Only inflating the tyres to factory specs did it, but I wanted them softer to improve the ride.

Sometimes smartphone intuitive, at others Nokia idiosyncratic, the Swift's infotainment is a funny mix.

BEN BARRY

Suzuki Swift 1.2 Hybrid Ultra

Month 6

The story so far

Suzuki's eternal supermini, aiming to punch above its weight

+ Light; sensibly sized; frugal

– It's not as good to drive as some previous Swifts have been

Logbook

Price £19,799 (£19,799 as tested) **Performance** 1197cc turbocharged three-cylinder, 81bhp, 12.5sec 0-62mph, 103mph **Efficiency** 64.2mpg (official), 57.5mpg (tested), 99g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 10.5p per mile **Miles this month** 1489 **Total miles** 8802

No, it won't polish out

Recently I was able to fully experience first hand the total lack of respect some drivers have for other drivers.

A trip to Milan to drive the Lynk & Co 02 meant I left the S3 in an airport car park, and I returned to find it with a huge dent on the rear of the driver's side. No note left, so no apology let alone any details of who I should claim against.

On closer inspection, it looked as though a white car had slammed its door open directly on to one of those stylish creases so carefully sketched on Ingolstadt's drawing boards. It missed the fuel cap by inches, which is a small mercy – any damage there would have made the repair even trickier.

The car is back with Audi for now as they assess the damage, and I'm in a slightly less engaging Q4 e-Tron.

CURTIS MOLDRICH

Audi S3 Black Edition TFSI S-tronic

Month 3

The story so far

Best bits of the old RS3 in a slightly less sporty package

+ Understated looks; strong performance; great colour

- Nagging feeling we're missing out by not having the RS3

Logbook

Price £47,490 (£51,135 as tested) **Performance** 1984cc turbo four-cylinder, 328bhp, 4.7sec 0-62mph, 155mph **Efficiency** 34.4mpg (official), 29.8mpg (tested), 188g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 22.0p per mile **Miles this month** 653 **Total miles** 1411

BYD SEAL MONTH 4

Seal-ing the deal

We get the BYD dealer experience by trading in our super-quick Seal for a longer-range version. By **Jake Groves**

The story so far

Out goes our blue flagship for a cheaper, rangier green one

+ Better range; great colour; rear-wheel drive more playful

- Skittish cross-traffic alert

Logbook

Price £45,695 (£46,571 as tested) **Performance** 82.5kWh battery, e-motor, 308bhp, 5.9sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Efficiency** 3.4 miles per kWh (official), 2.42 miles (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 354 miles (official), 342 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 22.7p per mile **Miles this month** 1095 **Total miles** 1182

Your closest car dealer could soon well be one selling BYDs. The Chinese brand's expansion across Europe and the UK is showing no signs of slowing down, helped by spending big on raising its profile by being a primary sponsor of the Euro 2024 football competition. Even with incoming tariffs and rival EVs hitting the market from all corners, BYD is confident it will keep growing.

BYD's launched four EVs (the Dolphin, Atto 3, Seal and Sealion) and a PHEV (the Seal U DM-i) in less than two years, looking to hit the most popular car-buying segments.

Bono Ge, BYD's UK director, says: 'We definitely want to grow our network. By the end of Q1 2025, we should have 80 dealers and by the end of the year we should have 120.'

He adds: 'A lot of people here [in the UK] have a real car culture. They want to experience the car, know the differences between them, care about driveability and handling… they love cars. We believe we have big potential here. It's really important that we have this network, because those who have bought our cars care about that aftersales support.'

The deep car knowledge among Brits he refers to means many buyers of combustion cars have a firm attachment to a more established manufacturer – but when it comes to EVs, they're more open minded.

The Seal seems to be the sweet spot, from BYD UK's perspective. The car has been positioned to tackle some of the most serious and accomplished competition – not least the Tesla Model 3 – and is competitively priced rather than cheap.

For the preceding three months, I've been finding out exactly what it's been like to run a Seal in powerful all-wheel-drive tech-fest Excellence specification. It's integrated into my life very easily, which says a lot about what BYD has prioritised to get people used to a 'new' brand quickly. Ge runs a Seal himself when he's in the UK, rather than the Netherlands, his other base.

'We've studied how competitors make better cars and learned from them, so much so that a Japanese institute bought a Seal, dismantled it and wrote a book on it,' he claims.

It's true: *A Thorough Disassembly of China's BYD Seal* was published by Nikkei Business ▶

Alex Tapley

Our new Seal is in a new colour: Shadow Green

LD74 YYT

BYD
WELCOME
JAKE GROVES
BUILD YOUR DREAMS
Mantles
BYD

Surely it's only a matter of time before he's *Sir* Jake

Publications and goes into detail about the car's construction, impressed and baffled in equal measure as to how BYD has managed it.

As part of my deep dive into the BYD experience, I'm changing cars halfway through the long-term loan, swapping my Ice Blue Excellence for the cheaper, longer-legged Design version. On paper, it's a little slower, with a single electric motor driving only the rear axle, and you lose a head-up display, but not much else is different. Its list price is £3k cheaper and, at the time of writing, around £100 per month cheaper on a personal lease. It also promises a slightly longer range.

You can see why I'd be keen to give that version a try. Naturally, the best place to do that is at one of BYD's many new dealers – and the closest (for now) to my Peterborough home is Mantles BYD in Royston.

On the way south, a mix of motorway miles and zippy single-carriageway A-roads, my Excellence is as neat, speedy and well-behaved as it's been from the start: well-finished interior with those super-soft light blue leather seats; I easily get 300 miles out of a charge; and it's fun for a blast.

And all the cabin tech works seamlessly… or almost all the tech. The cross-traffic alert still gets twitchy at roundabouts even after a software update, and the quick-setting menu for the infotainment screen is a fiddle to get open.

Mantles BYD in Royston is a cosy space, filled to the brim with new BYD models; the floor is sparklingly clean and huge windows let in loads of light. There I meet Muadh Hussain, Mo Miah and Shona Hewitt, and I'm given the full dealer experience: hot coffee, big smiles and plenty of pristine new metal to look at.

LG73 SGZ
LD74 YYT

Blue Excellence spec gives way to green Design

I get the full dealer experience: hot coffee, big smiles and plenty of pristine new metal to look at

When I arrive, the dealership is only a couple of weeks old, having opened with a launch party that coincided with celebrating BYD's 30th anniversary (it started as a battery maker in 1995 in Shenzhen; cars followed in 2003). As I walk through the dealership sipping a strong coffee, I tick off an Atto 3, a Dolphin and a gargantuan Yangwang U8 SUV, a range-extender G-Class rival from BYD's luxury sub-brand that's not yet launched in Europe. And then I see my name on a plinth next to a car under a cover.

As Muadh unveils my new Seal Design, the obvious detail that hits me is the interesting new colour: Shadow Green. I've previously only seen it on the online configurator, where it actually looks a little drab, but in reality it's a metallic hue with subtle sparkles hitting the sunlight. It has just 87 miles on the clock when I'm handed the key.

Out on the road for a quick back-to-back blast with my outgoing Excellence, the early signs are… business as usual. That's not a complaint.

The interior is all black, with some satin grey panelling (much less black gloss, hurrah!) on the dashboard. In the real world, it's also not that much slower than the Excellence – Eco mode does dampen power output much more than in my outgoing car, but there's still plenty of shove.

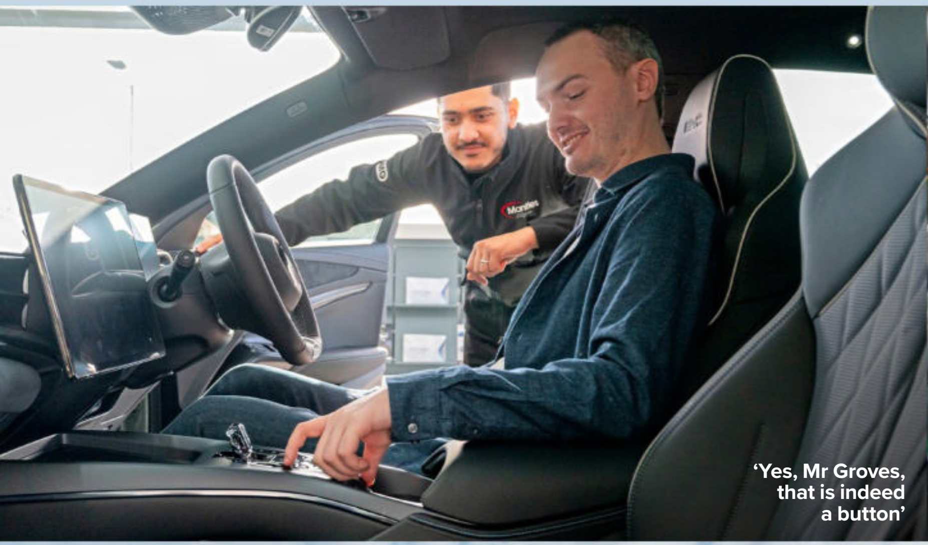
Not having a second motor makes the Design a smidge more playful in the corners, too. The traction control is a buzzkill but, being on eco tyres, you can get its backside to pivot under power a little more than in the all-wheel-drive version.

And what about the anticipated bonus range? It's early days, but BYD claims a boost of 50-ish miles, which will come in handy. I'll find out what that figure really equates to in the weeks ahead.

After swapping keys, I'm still enjoying life with the Seal. It's a car that may look unassuming out on the road, but one that packs in plenty of contemporary tech, and has been put together to a high standard.

BYD means business and, says Ge, isn't going to slow down: 'We're telling our retailers we want a 10-car showroom. We're preparing some product at the moment, with Sealion on the way and two, maybe three more products that are being considered. There are still some [market] segments where we don't have coverage yet that we want to cover.'

My time so far with the Seal, in two guises, gives no reason to doubt him.


'Yes, Mr Groves, that is indeed a button'

London-Cambridge line has been fully electric since 1988. Wait, come back...

LG73 SGZ
LD74 YYT

Twin test

Changing of the guard

Once famous for their engines, both Alfa and Mini are transitioning to EV. Which does it better? By **Piers Ward**

The story so far

Time to compare our three-door battery Mini with its nearest Alfa Romeo rival

+ Mini's compact dimensions shine on a tight racetrack

- Five-door Alfa and Mini's own Aceman really show up Cooper's minimal rear legroom

Logbook

Price £34,500 (£39,799 as tested) **Performance** 49kWh battery, e-motor, 215bhp, 6.7sec 0-62mph, 106mph **Efficiency** 4.2-4.4 miles per kWh (official), 3.8 miles per kWh (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 240-249 miles (official), 186 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 7.0p per mile **Miles this month** 1398 **Total miles** 4916

Isn't it nice to see Alfa Romeo back on form? Sales are up, the brand's past quality issues seem to be resolved and it's building cars that get both critics (Giulia) and customers (Tonale) excited. It's the sort of good-news story that we all need at the moment.

Mini has had fewer ups and downs than Alfa, more consistently delivering returns across the duration of BMW's ownership. But with both brands preparing to give up on years of petrol-engined heritage as they bring in more electric versions, it feels like a good time to see which might be best able to pay homage to the past while offering a clear way forward.

Not since the Mito has Mini had a natural Alfa rival. And even in the Junior you could argue that they're not natural bedfellows – one a relatively tall crossover with five doors, the other a compact three-door hatch styled to hark back to yesteryear.

But the Junior we're testing today is the Veloce version and that gets much closer to the Mini's mood board – both are trying to replicate some of the nippy handling characteristics of hot hatches of old.

The interior of the Alfa does a much better job of feeling driver-focused – even the touchscreen is angled towards you. The seats look great with their kidney cutaways and deep bolsters, to the point where the Mini's look anaemic in comparison. Twin hooded cowls over the dials, alcantara and red stitching add to the atmosphere in the Alfa.

Priced from £42,295, and packing 276bhp and 254lb ft, the Junior is the more powerful car here, to the tune of 61bhp. Crucially, it also comes with a limited-slip differential up front and, as we found when we drove it in Italy last summer, this is vital in making the Junior feel less Stellantis parts-bin and more actual Alfa. BMW has always managed to walk that tightrope with far more dexterity than most, giving its three car brands distinctive personalities but still managing to make the most of any cost savings.

What's impressive about the Mini is that, despite having a power disadvantage and a 25kg weight penalty, it gets to within a second of the Alfa's 0-62mph time. On the kart track where we're comparing them, ▶

Both respond well to being driven like hot hatches

Lee Brimble

YC24 BTE

COOPER S
YC24 BTE
AR-024JR

Alfa's extra height good for passengers, not the driver

> **Both inject a bit of character back into driving, after a long period when too many EVs were boring**

neither car manages to pull significantly ahead of the other. Both have a lovely sense of surplus power, front wheels scrabbling for traction at the exit of a corner, torque steer threatening to run away with you before you get the steering wheel straightened out.

The diff in the Alfa is a fine thing, allowing you to tighten the car's line by playing with the accelerator. It's the only EV I've driven that gets close to the wonderful adjustability of the Ford Fiesta ST. The Mini lacks this edge, feeling more stable but less adjustable.

Its tyres don't help it. Whereas the Alfa is on Michelin Pilot Sports and the most aggressive-looking 20-inch alloys (standard with Veloce trim), the Mini comes on Maxxis Premitra tyres that run out of grip far earlier. In normal road driving I've never had an issue but on the track they really hamper the Mini's performance.

It's a pity because the Cooper comes to you more instantly, offering a better chassis balance with less pitch and dive on the entry and exit of a corner, helped by the marginally more darty front end. It feels like a Mini, very nose-dominant and with minimal bodyroll. The ghost of Mini rallying legend Paddy Hopkirk may not quite approve of a 1.6-tonne Mini, but I like to think he'd at least acknowledge the ambition.

In the Alfa, you feel the car's extra height as you cut towards the apex, that momentary pause while the springs take the weight and before the body settles. In fairness, this kart track doesn't make it easy for the Alfa as it's quite technical, with several right/left flicks. On a road and with gentler bends, it should be much happier.

The Alfa's brakes are also nowhere near as effective – in Natural driving mode, there's not enough bite and the pedal is too soft, whereas with the Mini's you get a better sense of the grip available. Dynamic mode makes the Junior's better, but even then they're not as good as the Mini's.

A winner? It's mighty close but I'd have to plump for the Mini. But there's a wider point that's more pertinent: after a long period when too many EVs were accomplished but boring, both the Alfa and Mini manage to inject a bit of character back into driving. They're better for their flaws.

In other news, I had a very quick go in a Mini Aceman Cooper SE recently, the five-door equivalent of my car. On the plus side, it has enough rear legroom for adults; after four months with the Cooper SE, I'm still trying to work out where Mini has put all the space. On the minus side, to me it doesn't look enough like a Mini, and it rides dreadfully. I never thought anything could make my Mini feel comfortable – but the Aceman manages that dubious feat.

A double win for the Mini Cooper SE, then.

Goodbye

Just lacks magic

A merely good car in a sea of strong rivals. By **Ben Miller**

Peugeot E-2008 GT Electric 54kWh
Month 6

The story so far

Half a year with Pug's e-SUV
+ Stylish inside and out; nicely finished; good to drive
- Optimistic range predictor; mushy brake pedal; price

Logbook

Price £40,700 (£42,060 as tested) **Performance** 47.7kWh battery, e-motor, 154bhp, 9.1sec 0-62mph, 93mph **Efficiency** 4.9 miles per kWh (official), 3.9 miles (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 227-271 miles (official), 183 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 7.0p per mile **Miles this month** 1274 **Total miles** 4193

You might be fortunate enough to have a pronky car you pull out of the garage on special occasions. Several friends of mine own older 911s, mostly 997s. Two of them are GT3s. I'm delighted for them. If I had the garage space and the spare cash, it'd be a Renault Megane R26.R. In cars like that every drive is memorable, just as pretty much every ride on my increasingly idle motorcycles is memorable.

The E-2008, it won't surprise you to learn, is not like that. It is not a car with any of the tactility or stand-out sensory stimulation to lay down memories. I can't recall any individual drive. Instead, like looking back fondly on the years you spent in a certain house, or on a good summer as the first copper leaves of autumn fall, the lasting impression is a kind of indistinct happiness and contentment. An electric crossover isn't about soaring highs. But this one was about pleasant and highly effective transport.

Peugeot's current run of form is based on fine design and a premium level of finish. A re-working of a model originally launched in 2019, the 2008 is a good-looking car; faceted and funky where the ubiquitous Model Y is bland and bulbous. The E-2008's interior, as the three *CAR* readers who drove it in the summer will attest, is equally striking. The tiny, kart-like steering wheel isn't universally adored but the worst it elicits is mild bemusement. I love it: an all too rare example of originality in mainstream car design. And the interior design is as nicely resolved as the exterior; innovative, handsome and nicely screwed together.

The luxe atmosphere in our car was helped quite a bit by the sports seats GT trim unlocks. Finished in alcantara with acid green stitching, they're also power adjustable, heated and massage-equipped (for £500).

All this Audi-bothering class doesn't suddenly disappear when you actually drive the Peugeot, either. Yes, the brake pedal is gratingly vague and mushy and the ride lacks sophistication at times, a combination of weight, tight budgets and bumpy roads prompting some bouncing at the rear. But generally the Peugeot drives nicely; quiet, fast enough and immensely easy, whether you're nipping into town or gliding home from an airport on empty motorways in the small hours.

Easy to spec, too. It's hard to build an argument for the car with the smaller (50kWh) battery, and the only way into a car with the bigger 54kWh unit is with a GT model. Opt for that and you're all but done. All that remains is to ignore the plethora of newer, spunkier rivals (Renault Scenic, Kia EV3) joining this swollen sector by the day.

Count the cost

Cost new £42,060 **Part exchange** £20750 **Cost per mile** 7.0p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £4.97

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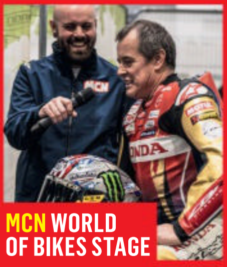

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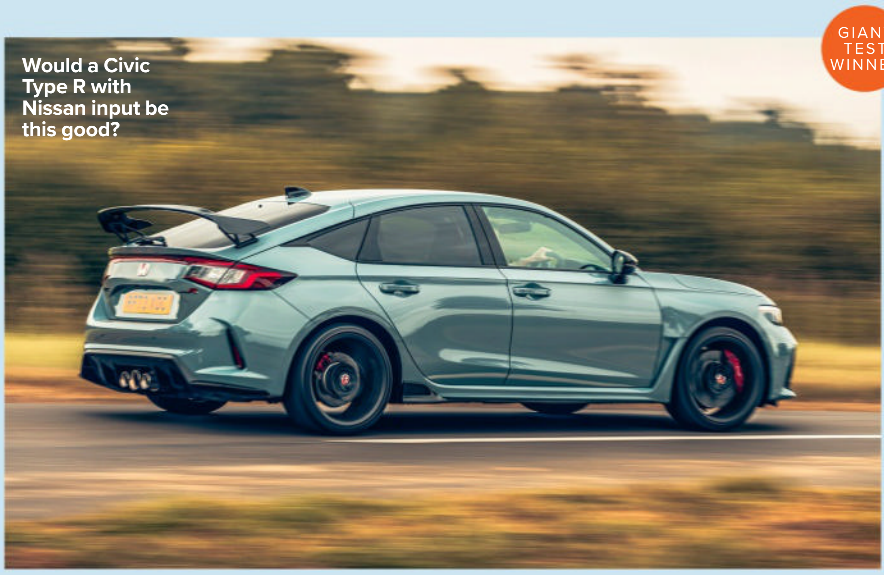
HOW DOES GBU WORK?
CAR's road testers highlight what's so good about the best cars in every class... and what could be better

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly: The Top 5s

TOP 5 HOT HATCHES


Would a Civic Type R with Nissan input be this good?

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

THE GOOD: Feel, feedback, focus: a phenomenal full-sized hot hatch

THE BAD: Now £50,050 for a front-drive hatchback with barely any more power than before

THE UGLY: Probably the last of its kind; good job it's one of the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one model; £459 a month on a three-year PCP with an £11k deposit

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

TOYOTA GR YARIS

THE GOOD: A modern-day rally homologation special that's thrilling to drive

THE BAD: Road noise like a death-metal gig; joke rear seats

THE UGLY: Long waiting list, even with some versions priced at £60,000, although it starts at £44,250

THE ONE TO BUY: Now has optional auto but go for the manual

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

AUDI RS3

THE GOOD: Want a five-cylinder hot hatch? Your option is RS3, with five or four doors

THE BAD: Now £60k; small boot for both

THE UGLY: It's better than before, but improved S3 looks like superior value

THE ONE TO BUY: £60,105 for the hatch; an extra grand for the saloon

4

VW GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

THE GOOD: Rare mix of supreme comfort, hatchback versatility and cornering bite

THE BAD: The stats don't really shine in a 2025 context

THE UGLY: Mk8.5 a definite improvement, but interface still offers plenty to gripe about

THE ONE TO BUY: £42,155 for a very good Golf is pretty decent value

5

VW CUPRA BORN

THE GOOD: Cupra at its best, making a real difference to VW component parts; fun to drive and decent battery range

THE BAD: Vague brakes – not what you want on a hot hatch

THE UGLY: Some lingering traces of ID. 3

THE ONE TO BUY: VZ starts around £45k, with 372-mile range and 321bhp

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TOP 5 SPORTS CARS

Electric replacement seems further off than ever

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

PORSCHE 911

THE GOOD: Exquisite blend of power, accuracy, excitement, style and usability, and new GTS integrates hybrid beautifully

THE BAD: You have to look down to #3 in this category to see the affordable performance Porsche; 911 barely scrapes in at just under £100k

THE UGLY: It keeps getting bigger and heavier

THE ONE TO BUY: That basic Carrera is ace, and it's hard to imagine you'll regret it for a minute. But if you want more power and more trickery then Porsche has plenty of ways to take more of your money

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

ARIEL ATOM

THE GOOD: A beautiful object as well as a thrilling drive; think of it as a modernised Lotus Seven crossed with a high-end sportsbike

THE BAD: You'll need bike-style wet-weather gear if it's raining. And at least £40k – this is an expensive toy, if a captivating one

THE UGLY: The 4R is even more bonkers

THE ONE TO BUY: Do you really need the 350bhp power upgrade option?

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN/BOXSTER

THE GOOD: Sublime handling; surprising practicality

THE BAD: Less characterful than an Alpine; such an obvious choice it's almost boring

THE UGLY: Flat-four versions sound like a VW Beetle in a duet with Eeyore

THE ONE TO BUY: GT4 RS the most thrilling, Spyder is ace, but flat-six GTS 4.0 is a cut-price GT4 at £75k

4

LOTUS EMIRA

THE GOOD: The first new combustion Lotus in years is fantastically well resolved. Usable, desirable and thrilling

THE BAD: Harder work to live with than a Cayman

THE UGLY: The last petrol Lotus – just as the company gets the financial stability to build on its brilliance

THE ONE TO BUY: AMG-sourced four is an interesting but pricey addition

5

ALPINE A110

THE GOOD: The perfectly formed antidote to a world of excess; a modern classic in every sense of the term

THE BAD: Two boots, neither big, and not much oddment storage inside

THE UGLY: 'R' is 34kg lighter – some effort – but also nearly £100k. Too much

THE ONE TO BUY: A110 S adds handling poise for £67,490 but £54,490 base A110 is all you need

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TOP 5 GRAND TOURERS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

FERRARI ROMA

THE GOOD: Style, speed and sensuous lines; a car for, and from, a bygone age

THE BAD: An age in which we no longer live, tragically

THE UGLY: Baffling steering-wheel touchpads; strangled exhaust note

THE ONE TO BUY: The cabrio. Arguably even more beautiful, until you sit in it, that is

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT

THE GOOD: Luxury, power, agility and a great-looking body

THE BAD: Nope, it's really sorted

THE UGLY: Just because it's always been heavy and thirsty won't stop us complaining that it's heavy and thirsty

THE ONE TO BUY: New plug-in range-topper is the most powerful Bentley ever, and so much more besides

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

PORSCHE 911 TURBO

THE GOOD: Hypercar-bothering pace, any road, any weather

THE BAD: Only fun when you're really going for it

THE UGLY: Turbo has never been good for depreciation; even less so recently

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry car plenty fast enough but £180,600 Turbo S outsells it; add £10k for a Convertible

PORSCHE TAYCAN CROSS TURISMO

THE GOOD: Raised ride height absolutely monsters lumpy UK roads

THE BAD: Not actually that practical

THE UGLY: Audi's e-Tron GT gets the nicer cockpit

THE ONE TO BUY: Revised versions has arrived, along with revised prices: 4S Cross Turismo is now £100,400, and range hits £162k

ASTON MARTIN DB12

THE GOOD: Effortlessly beautiful DB11 replacement now has the traction to make the most of the rampant turbo V8's stomp. Excellent new interior

THE BAD: Overshadowed by the success of DBX

THE UGLY: Aston simply doesn't do ugly

THE ONE TO BUY: Coupe is £185k; Volante the stunner

TOP 5 COUPES AND CABRIOS

BMW M2

THE GOOD: The longitudinal-engined two-door BMW coupe lives

THE BAD: Bigger and heavier than we'd like but outrageous fun

THE UGLY: You need £66k to get involved; steering a shade rubbery

THE ONE TO BUY: Manual or auto transmission options – get the knob. We'd go M carbon seats, too

MASERATI MC20

THE GOOD: A no-excuses excellent Maserati. Handling and ride to match the looks; a GT as well as a sports car

THE BAD: Throttle could be sharper in normal mode

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you did mean to buy the Maser and not the 296

THE ONE TO BUY: The droptop Cielo. All the coupe's go with added style

MERCEDES-AMG SL

THE GOOD: Latest SL is developed by AMG but it's still a cruiser, and all the better for it

THE BAD: Engines are still better than the ride and handling

THE UGLY: Cabin designed by touchpad scattergun

THE ONE TO BUY: The £148k, 469bhp SL55; also look at the coupe cousin, the AMG GT

MAZDA MX-5

THE GOOD: Closest thing to a modern-day Lotus Elan; genius folds-flat-in-seconds roof

THE BAD: Lashings of bodyroll; the 1.5 can't climb hills

THE UGLY: If you're over 6ft tall you simply won't fit

THE ONE TO BUY: Motorised-metal-roof RF doesn't quite make sense; 1.5 starts at £28k, punchier 2.0 from £32k with an LSD

ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

THE GOOD: Fast and comfortable, and utterly gorgeous

THE BAD: Gets very thirsty without too much provocation

THE UGLY: DB12 and Vantage are also very good

THE ONE TO BUY: £333,000 will get you a very fine long, low, two-seat sports car/GT/near-supercar coupe

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUPERCARS

1

FERRARI 296 GTB

THE GOOD: Timeless styling and a driving experience as good as any of Maranello's finest

THE BAD: You need reflexes like a fighter pilot to drive it as fast as it can go

THE UGLY: Touch-sensitive steering-wheel pads make the interface borderline unusable

THE ONE TO BUY: Fiorano pack is £25k+ overkill. GTS adds sunshine

2

PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS

THE GOOD: Spine-tingling sound; 9000rpm redline; total immersion

THE BAD: Nothing to see here

THE UGLY: Getting on the waiting list is like winning both *The X Factor* and *The Apprentice*

THE ONE TO BUY: RS is somehow more focused than the GT3 but more road-compliant at the same time. How do they do it?

3

LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

THE GOOD: The monstrous, naturally-aspirated V12 lives on – now e-boosted and wrapped in such a hard-to-crash package insurance should be a tenner. Vastly improved cabin, too

THE BAD: Price has skyrocketed

THE UGLY: EV-only range is six miles

THE ONE TO BUY: There is only one for now

4

McLAREN 750S

THE GOOD: Lighter, more powerful, better: evolution of 720S is another corker from Woking

THE BAD: 30 per cent new but you'd struggle to tell

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you actually bought the new car

THE ONE TO BUY: Stick to the comfort-spec seats and avoid the harnesses on the top 'super carbon' ones

5

CHEVROLET CORVETTE Z06

THE GOOD: A beautifully balanced performance package that can stand tall among the supercar aristocracy

THE BAD: Interior quality and kit not quite there

THE UGLY: Will future electrification kill the thrill?

THE ONE TO BUY: Add the Z07 pack for upgraded aero, suspension, brakes and wheels; expect to pay £140k

TOP 5 PLUG-IN HYBRIDS

1

GIANT TEST WINNER

BMW X5 50e

THE GOOD: Massive 67-mile official e-range; horizon-eating performance

THE BAD: Hybrid hardware cuts into boot space to the tune of 150 litres; no seven-seat option

THE UGLY: Not much now that the facelifted 50e model with more e-range and power is here

THE ONE TO BUY: This one, for £82k

2

FORD KUGA

THE GOOD: Facelift has brought better efficiency, and it still drives very well

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't great, although fuel consumption's good

THE UGLY: Not so much ugly as dowdy, particularly the interior – not a patch on the electric Explorer

THE ONE TO BUY: PHEV in ST-Line X trim can be had for £39,755

3

PORSCHE CAYENNE

THE GOOD: Handling; driver focus; choice of body styles; 0-62mph in 5.0sec

THE BAD: Bigger battery for facelift model but still can't match the X5

THE UGLY: The front passenger touchscreen: £1000 and not needed

THE ONE TO BUY: If you value the U in SUV, avoid the coupe – even if it is a great steer

4

VOLKSWAGEN TIGUAN

THE GOOD: Mk3 is bigger than ever but still a neat all-round package. Choice of 201 and 268bhp PHEVs, both with 62-mile e-range

THE BAD: Room for improvement with the infotainment

THE UGLY: People are buying Tiguans instead of Golfs, in huge numbers

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for either of the eHybrids in good-value Match trim

5

BMW 330e

THE GOOD: Goes sub-six to 62mph and up to 41 electric miles on a charge

THE BAD: Engine is slightly coarse; plain 330i is less heavy, more fun

THE UGLY: Hybrid kit eats into boot space so regular 3s are roomier

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of saloon or estate. Handsome, vaguely affordable 330e Sport Touring is £48,785

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TOP 5 ELECTRIC CARS

Past and future meet in fine style, at a great price too

GIANT TEST WINNER

RENAULT 5 E-TECH

THE GOOD: The way it looks, the way it drives, the keen pricing – but it's also refreshingly practical, with five doors, a usable rear bench, and good efficiency, too

THE BAD: Fiddly gear selector stalk; no frunk

THE UGLY: What ugly? Look at it

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry point is £22,995 but we'd splash a few more grand on mid-spec Techno, which gets the '5' charging indicator on the bonnet and other desirable bits of kit, plus the option of the bigger battery, 52 rather than 40kWh

GIANT TEST WINNER

HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

THE GOOD: Electric and exciting – synthetic drive modes and gearchange are game changers

THE BAD: Breadth of configurability takes getting used to. Ignore that it's software-driven – it feels real

THE UGLY: Interior quality below par for a £65k car

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one model; paint and a sunroof the only options – all the drive modes are included

PORSCHE TAYCAN

THE GOOD: Totally overhauled but still fast, responsive and fluid; now more efficient

THE BAD: Info screen in front of the passenger is faintly ridiculous

THE UGLY: Prices are all up

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £86.5k for the rear-drive basic Taycan; you can pay a lot more and get a bit more performance

KIA EV3

THE GOOD: Roomy and clever interior; great value for such long range; funky looks – it's a shrunken EV9 or EV6

THE BAD: Air trim feels cheap inside

THE UGLY: That weird climate-control screen

THE ONE TO BUY: The 270-mile-range car is brilliant value but most will want the longer-range option. GT-Line is our pick for value-to-comfort goodness

RENAULT SCENIC

THE GOOD: Good value; long range; pleasant to drive; looks smart inside and out

THE BAD: Sometimes lumpy ride; poor rear visibility; rear seats don't slide or do other family-friendly tricks

THE UGLY: The boot is very deep, but not actually that big, and you have to pay extra for a variable floor

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the big battery in Techno trim

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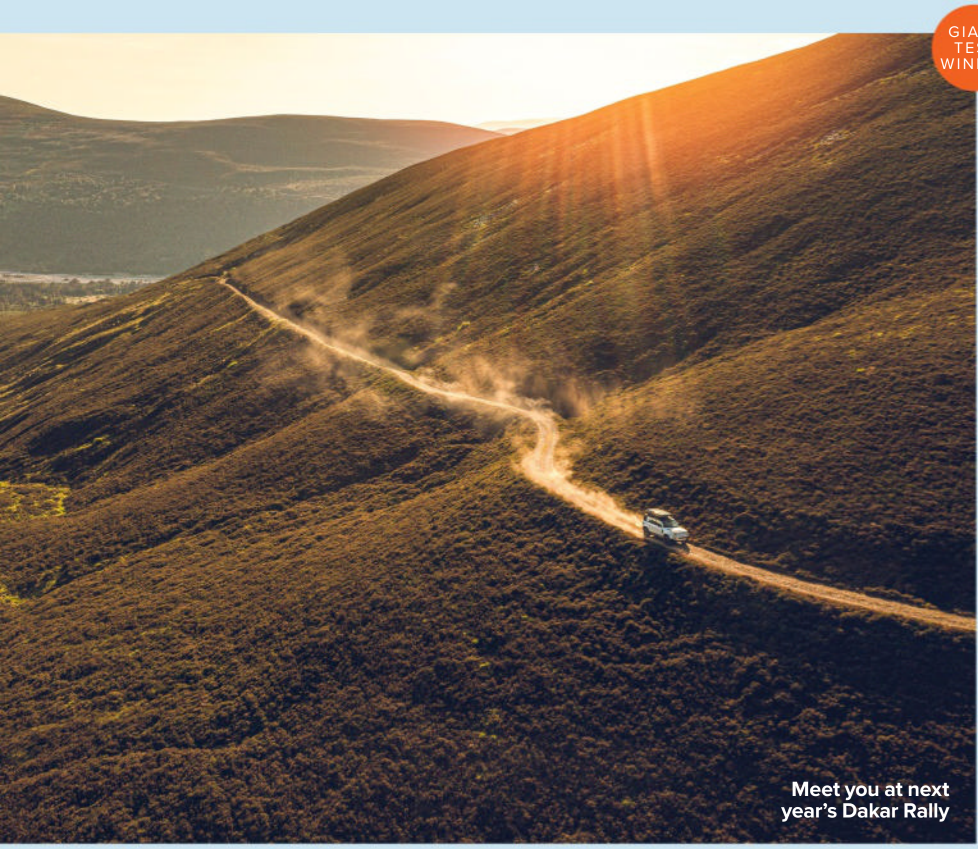
TOP 5 SUVs/CROSSOVERS


Meet you at next year's Dakar Rally

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

LAND ROVER DEFENDER

THE GOOD: Reboot brings untold dynamic improvements wherever you drive

THE BAD: Second-row access is a pain in the 90; expensive; 130 in particular is very big, so parking can be tricky

THE UGLY: Very nice inside, so you're wary of getting it muddy

THE ONE TO BUY: Range spans 90, 110 and 130 bodies, with significantly different dimensions but remarkably similar character and the genuine off-road ability that Land Rover always delivers so convincingly. Heart says petrol V8 90, head/wallet say diesel-six D250 110

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

PORSCHE MACAN

THE GOOD: The new one is electric – and as impressive as the outgoing combustion version

THE BAD: As family transport it has its shortcomings, especially boot space

THE UGLY: If you want an engine you'll need to be quick

THE ONE TO BUY: Starts at £67k and goes up to £95k for the Turbo; £70k 4 offers all you could sensibly want

3

ASTON MARTIN DBX 707

THE GOOD: Now with a much improved interior, the DBX keeps the glorious noise, masterful balance, rear-axle bias and surprising practicality

THE BAD: High fuel consumption and emissions from the twin-turbo V8

THE UGLY: There's no longer a non-707 version, so you need to pay top dollar

THE ONE TO BUY: The 707 will cost you around £210k

4

MERCEDES G-CLASS

THE GOOD: Rejigged range spans diesel, petrol, AMG and EV, and they're all good: agile off-road, smooth and comfy on-road

THE BAD: It's all a bit fancy; how do you feel about muddy wellies?

THE UGLY: Merc's premium mission means it's a posh version or nothing

THE ONE TO BUY: Electric is astonishingly good, but painfully expensive at £180k-plus

5

INEOS QUARTERMASTER

THE GOOD: Pick-up version of the Grenadier has a long wheelbase that if anything improves the handling

THE BAD: Not very roomy for passengers

THE UGLY: Isuzus are much cheaper

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £66k, but a Trialmaster edition at £74k brings together a practical and good-looking set of extras

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TOP 5 LUXURY CARS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

RANGE ROVER

THE GOOD: Masterful and hugely desirable reinvention of an icon. An EV version is due soon

THE BAD: Reliability remains a worry. EV could be v v heavy

THE UGLY: The D350 mild-hybrid straight-six diesel is sublime. Can you live with the guilt?

THE ONE TO BUY: The above (from £107k), though the V8 is fun

ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM

THE GOOD: Money-no-object pinnacle of serenity and craftsmanship

THE BAD: Is this really you? And is this really appropriate in 2025?

THE UGLY: Filthy-money associations

THE ONE TO BUY: It's 'standard' or long-wheelbase, from £380k. All cars are built to order and most owners spend £500k

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

THE GOOD: Now a hybrid V8, the Spur has great performance and poise plus decent e-range

THE BAD: Other VW Group cars get even smarter chassis tech

THE UGLY: Lots of emphasis on expensive options

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the Speed, from £266,500

MERCEDES S-CLASS

THE GOOD: Tech-fest with timeless waftability. Few cars are more calming

THE BAD: Surprisingly unrefined petrol six; doesn't ride as well as it should

THE UGLY: Trying not to crash while using the Hyperscreen

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid 580e works best. That's £114k in entry AMG Line Premium trim

ROLLS-ROYCE SPECTRE

THE GOOD: A joy to drive, and exquisitely built

THE BAD: Efficiency not great

THE UGLY: Fabulous detailing and engineering will benefit so few

THE ONE TO BUY: It's £330k in theory, but in reality, as every one is spec'd from a large and flexible options list, it's going to cost you more than £400,000

TOP 5 FAMILY CARS

BIG SELLER
1

BMW 3-SERIES

THE GOOD: On-the-deck driving position; dreamy handling balance; slick interior

THE BAD: Knowing you've made the obvious choice

THE UGLY: You'll need an M340i or M340d for six cylinders

THE ONE TO BUY: 330e if you want a hybrid; 320i if you're on a budget

GIANT TEST WINNER
2

BMW 5-SERIES

THE GOOD: Much has changed; still great. Handling defines the class

THE BAD: It's grown to become a very hefty car

THE UGLY: Is nowhere safe? Even the tradition-embracing 5-series gets a full EV option in the form of the i5

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £51,915 for the 520i but can easily exceed £80k

DACIA JOGGER

THE GOOD: Seven seats; massive boot with the rear row removed; prices start just over £18k

THE BAD: Sandero base means it's a bit narrow; spartan

THE UGLY: Low Euro NCAP score, although it's pretty safe in a crash

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid usefully punchier than petrol, but much clunkier. PCP a steal at £166 a month

VOLKSWAGEN ID. 7

THE GOOD: The most coherent ID to date now in a choice of hatch and estate. Not posh, but highly agreeable

THE BAD: Frumpy styling and that still sub-par interface

THE UGLY: So few electric estates to choose from

THE ONE TO BUY: Pro Match with 77kWh battery does the job just fine, priced from £51,500 for the hatch

AUDI S6 E-TRON

THE GOOD: Electric saloon and estate is refined, quick and pretty sharp, with a typically smart cabin and decent range

THE BAD: Rear passenger room isn't great

THE UGLY: Audi's constant model name changes are just confusing

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the £69k rear-wheel-drive A6 e-Tron Sport Performance

TOP 5 FAMILY HATCHES

BMW 1-SERIES

THE GOOD: Premium and practical, and a lot more normal than the original 1-series

THE BAD: Actually a bit too normal for some tastes

THE UGLY: Facelift has dialled down the ugly, thankfully

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of £30k mild-hybrid front-drive 120 and £41k all-wheel-drive 296bhp M135; very different, both good

PEUGEOT 208

THE GOOD: Style; big-car character; knockout interior; EV version available

THE BAD: So-so handling; a squash for adult rear-seat passengers

THE UGLY: Dumping the wheel in your lap like a TV dinner to see the dials clearly

THE ONE TO BUY: Range from £21k, but £26k GT is worth saving up for. Bright colour is best

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

MINI COUNTRYMAN

THE GOOD: Wonderful interior and all-round feelgood factor from big new five-door

THE BAD: You need to be in the mood for the built-in zaniness

THE UGLY: Options can send the price into the stratosphere

THE ONE TO BUY: Your basic Countryman C Classic is just fine at a sniff under £30k

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

THE GOOD: Brain-out default choice still a solid all-rounder; ride, visibility, roominess

THE BAD: Seat Leon a very similar package for a lower price

THE UGLY: Revised Mk8.5 version imminent, so supplies are patchy

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 TSI 150 at £300pcm or £28k; roomy estate is also great value

RENAULT CLIO

THE GOOD: Still fun to drive, and pretty practical for young families

THE BAD: Not actually very quick

THE UGLY: An even simpler, more basic version would be welcome

THE ONE TO BUY: No need to go higher than the base Evolution spec and an 89bhp TCE 90 three-cylinder engine, yours for £18k/£191 a month

TOP 5 SPORTS SALOONS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

BMW M3/M4 COMPETITION

THE GOOD: Mighty straight-six; front axle's never-give-up attitude; dreamy chassis balance

THE BAD: No manual; nearly 911 money now

THE UGLY: M3 Touring £88k new but now changing hands for much less

THE ONE TO BUY: The CS, if you were lucky enough to bag one of the 100 brought here. Used Touring is a good secondhand buy

MERCEDES-AMG S63

THE GOOD: V8 plus e-motor shows AMG can do a great performance hybrid, and in the most unlikely of places: a huge luxury saloon

THE BAD: Boot size suffers, and ride quality isn't perfect

THE UGLY: It's a pity this approach wasn't applied to the new C63

THE ONE TO BUY: Two versions, both at £189k, one with more black trim

BMW M5

THE GOOD: Very rapid, ridiculously agile and refreshingly low on emissions; a clever reboot in PHEV form

THE BAD: Lots of modes, and an odd amount of wind noise

THE UGLY: Heavy and expensive, so it's not that clever

THE ONE TO BUY: £113,405 for the Touring; £2k less for the saloon

ALFA GIULIA QUADRIFOGLIO

THE GOOD: Charisma in spades, fantastic agility and almost as good as an M3 to drive

THE BAD: Emphasis on *almost* as good as an M3 to drive

THE UGLY: Flaky interior quality; infotainment still lags behind the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one, wonderful, model from £79,495/£699pcm

PORSCHE PANAMERA

THE GOOD: New version builds on success of the very fine model it replaces

THE BAD: Barely a saloon – four-up is okay, but forget five

THE UGLY: Estate version is no longer available, even though it was the best looker

THE ONE TO BUY: £79,500 gets the base model; Turbo E-Hybrid at £141k now tops the range

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Maximum range on a full charge for a CUPRA Tavascan is 298.9 - 353.6 miles (official test WLTP figures) depending on the trim. Official fuel consumption for the Tavascan mpg (litres/100km) combined: N/A. Combined CO_2 emissions: 0g/km. Test data obtained under standardised conditions after the battery had been fully charged (to 100%). The Tavascan is a battery electric vehicle requiring mains electricity for charging. Figures shown are for comparability purposes and may vary by trim. Only compare fuel consumption, CO_2 and electric range figures with other vehicles tested to the same technical procedures. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon a number of factors including the starting charge of the battery, accessories fitted (post-registration), variations in weather, driving styles, route conditions, speed, vehicle and battery age and vehicle load. Zero emissions while driving. Data correct at December 2024.